A HOMEMADE TALE

ONCE UPON A TIME

IN

CHRISTMAS TREE COUNTRY

BY

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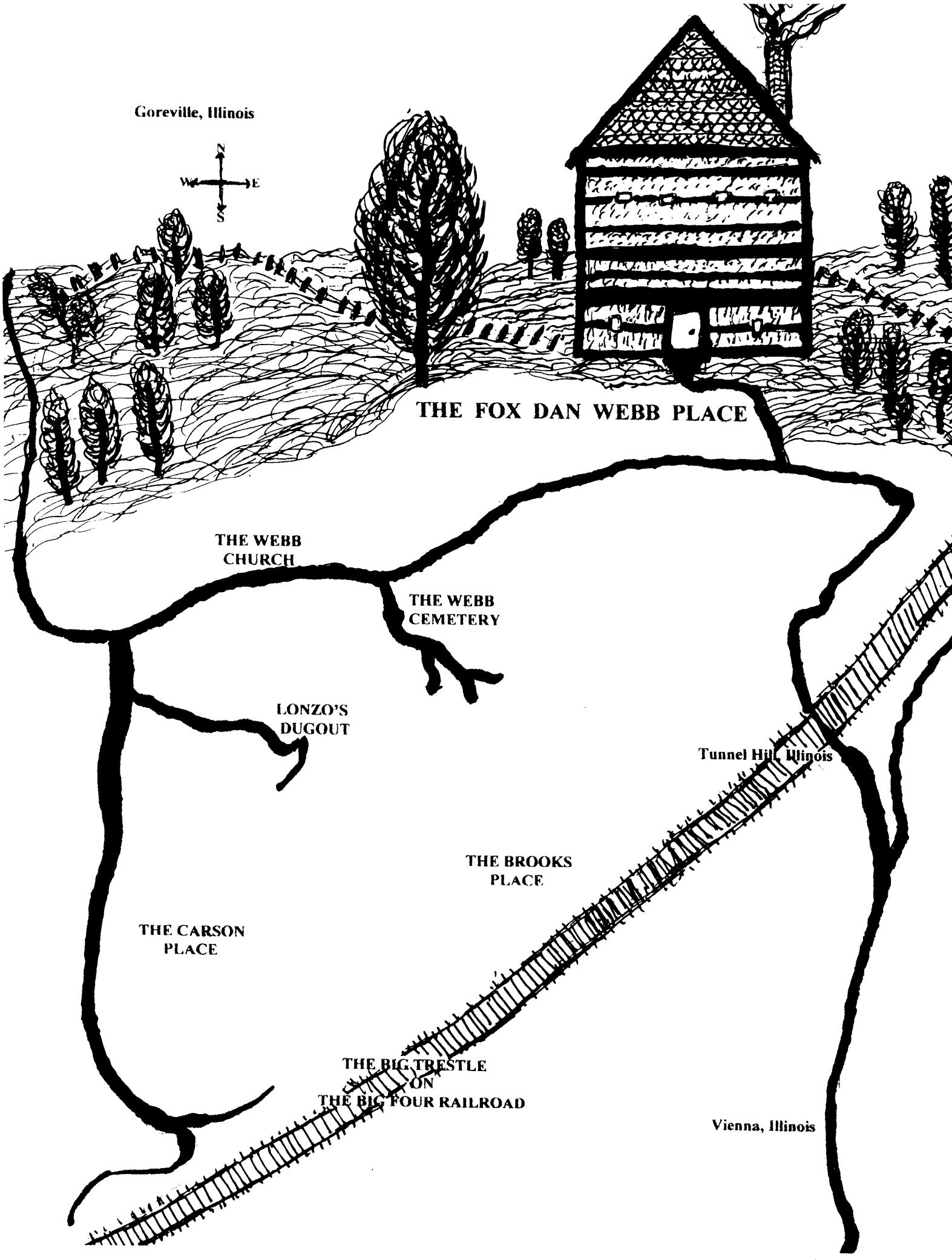
Goreville, Illinois
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W
E
S
THE FOX DAN WEBB PLACE
THE WEBB CHURCH
THE WEBB CEMETERY
LONZO'S DUGOUT
Tunnel Hill, Illinois
THE BROOKS PLACE
THE CARSON PLACE
THE BIG TRESTLE ON THE BIG FOUR RAILROAD
Vienna, Illinois

WELCOME TO CHRISTMAS TREE COUNTRY

"Once Upon a Time in Christmas Tree Country"
is a tale about real characters: a young couple
and their three children, the couple's extended
families, one eccentric man, and two
interesting mules.

The characters lived west of Tunnel Hill, Illinois,
a village in Southern Illinois in Johnson County.
All names, with the exception of the mules' names, of course,
are documented in the Johnson County Court House,
in Vienna, Illinois.

The speaking characters
were born in the rural area of Tunnel Hill,
commonly known as The Tunnel.

The one non-speaking character, Albert William Schierbaum,
was born in Evansville, Indiana. When he was five, his parents,
Adolphus Ludwig Schierbaum and Aslena Elmira Daniels Schierbaum,
moved with him to the Tunnel Hill area.

All of these characters blended into
the Creator's hills and valleys among
randomly scattered cedars – Christmas trees.
Against the backdrop of His landscape,
this tale is a word picture depicting the works of His
hands and is a glimpse into the personalities of these
who – once upon a time – lived in His garden,
Christmas Tree Country.

Although this narrative employs the use of
fictional dialogue and episodes,
the story's setting is
in the rural area of Tunnel Hill, Illinois,
in the actual homes of the characters
in the mid-thirties
of the twentieth century
during the latter part of the month of December.

Who is the main character in the Christmas Tree Country tale? Everybody! That's the way it was in Johnson County! The folks lived. The folks told stories. The folks told about folks. You see? The stories included each and every single person.

Yes, all characters play meaningful roles. And while some folks and one mule say little, those less vocal players are as important as those who do speak. First, let's begin with the tale's two, talkative, young boys. That's enough said -- for now.

Our tale starts out with these lads who were making a visit to their grandmother's house. Does this sound like the beginning of another tale -- the one about a young girl who was going to see HER grandmother? Let's think! The girl's name might have been Little Red or Little Rider -- or something similar. Well, let's not dwell on her name, for now. Let's just "get on" with telling this never-before-told homemade tale!

The boys' grandmother -- unlike the girl's grandmother -- didn't live alone, and she wasn't sick or "laid up" in the bed. On the contrary, their grandmother lived with a big household of folks, and being able-bodied, she took care of herself and, as the Johnson County folks would say, a big "passle" of folks. But the boys, like the girl, were taking something to their grandmother -- Granny.

In the more famous tale, the girl chose a sunny day for her walk to Grandmother's house. Along the way, she meandered through the breezy woodland and skipped down a neatly manicured path. Try to understand this, will you? That path was a horticultural art! All kinds of beautiful flowers displayed their magnificent beauty along the way, each flower hoping to be chosen as most beautiful. Naturally, the girl scrutinizingly picked and examined the florets and carefully categorized and applied her botanical knowledge of the flora of the region.

Let's put this in plain, Johnson County talk! Did the girl pick a lot of flowers? Yes! Did she pick just any ole flower? Of course not! Did she squash her flowers and hold them in a wad? Why, no! She knew that wasn't the proper way to handle those pretty flowers!

Picture this! To insure the best floral delivery, she carried on her arm a lovely basket, one made of twigs, rushes, and thin veneer -- lined with the finest flax-yarn linen and monogrammed in satiny pink with her initials, LRRH. On an important mission she was, and she arranged elaborate nosegay and bouquet arrangements -- just so-so -- hoping they'd cheer up Grandmother.

Although the boys, too, were on a mission, they weren't picking any flowers! They didn't carry a basket for flowers. They didn't have a monogram. Truthfully, they'd never heard of a monogram.

So what was the reason for their trip? They were delivering food for Granny's table -- minus the flowers. Why? Granny couldn't cook flowers! Granny hadn't ever "stirred up" any flower gravy or flower biscuits or flower cornbread. Granny's cooking method -- a pinch of this, two pinches of that, a part of a cup of such 'n such, and a little dab of whatever she had -- didn't call for flowers. No, child!

In contrast with the girl who was tiptoeing along in her wonderland in temperate weather, our heroes were out in the cold -- smack dab in the dead of winter. No flowers were in bloom. You see? Flowers just didn't do too well in the freezing

weather in Johnson County. That right there cancelled out the taking of any wild daisies or wild roses or goldenrods or peonies or whatever.

To keep the record straight, the two youngsters in our homemade tale didn't while away the whole day and skip down some smooth path. Why not? First, Christmas Tree Country time was too precious to waste. And the second reason was that they were boys, and they figured that any boys "worth their salt" wouldn't fool around with skipping like a girl. Furthermore, the distance from their house on The Fox Dan Webb Place to Granny's house on The Carson Place was more than a few hops, skips, and jumps, so the boys rode in a wagon behind two mules who "hotfooted it" on down a bumpy dirt road and hauled them to Granny's house.

Now! Even though the lads were every bit as brave as the little Hood girl, they weren't going all that distance by themselves. Why? Their mommie wouldn't let them go alone. No! Daddy'd be the third man in the party. He'd promised Mommie he'd scare off the wild animals.

But, truthfully, Daddy didn't expect to meet up with a mean animal. He had no thoughts of having to put up with any kind of animal, especially not a hairy, bigmouthed animal -- one that could do human talk or one that would show up wearing people clothes and have long ears and a mouthful of sharp, pointed teeth. That kind of ridiculous-looking something-or-another hadn't ever been seen in Johnson County!

Had Daddy ever heard about a talking animal? Well, yes, he had! He'd been told that the Bible said that a long time ago in some county -- or some place on the other side of the world -- there was a donkey that could do human talk. That's right! The Bible said a man by the name of Balaam rode that donkey. And do you know something else? When the Bible said it was true, Daddy believed it.

Maybe you should check out this story for yourself, yes! You'll learn, like Daddy, that Balaam's talking donkey didn't have it in him to push some old woman around and jump up on her nice, clean featherbed and pile up under her homemade quilts and covers and start talking. He wasn't a mean donkey. But he was a donkey! And you can read all about him in the Bible, and you'll understand why he was doing human talk. Anyway -- where that donkey did that talking -- that was a long, long way from Johnson County, and that'd happened a long, long time ago!

Let's get away from the donkey. Here's a question for you! Did you ever stop to inquire as to the whereabouts of Little Red Riding Hood's daddy when she was facing her crisis? And here's another one for you! Why wasn't her mommie more concerned with her innocent, young daughter being out there in the woods -- all alone -- with some ornery, conniving, smart-mouthed wolf roaming around the countryside? You'll have to admit you've got to wonder about Mommie Hood and Poppie Hood.

So much, then, to lay out the historical facts and personal thoughts of this writer for you readers of the Christmas Tree Country tale. . . .

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CHARACTERS

Allen Adolph Schierbaum **December 22, 1903 – February 14, 1979** **and** **Katie Catherine Brooks Schierbaum** **September 1, 1910 – May 17, 2000**	**-- Author's Father** **-- Author's Mother**
Kenneth Ray Schierbaum **May 5, 1929 – December 24, 2008**	**-- Author's Brother**
Benjamin Franklin "Bennie" Schierbaum **April 16, 1931 -**	**-- Author's Brother**
Elsie Geraldine Schierbaum Riggs-Heuer-Palmer **September 1, 1933 – April 16, 1997**	**-- Author's Sister**
Albert William Schierbaum **January 10, 1882 – May 31, 1944** **and** **Lula Aran Webb Schierbaum** **December 27, 1885 – March 17, 1970**	**-- Author's Paternal Grandfather** **-- Author's Paternal Grandmother**

Lonzo, a man in the community

Ole Beck and Kate, the mules

Now, the tale begins! ***Once upon a time a long time ago***, there were two boys, 6-year-old Kenneth Ray and 4-year-old Bennie. They lived with their daddy, Allen, who was a third-generation Schierbaum in Johnson County, and their mommie, who was Katie Catherine Brooks Schierbaum, and their baby sister, Elsie Geraldine. Allen's family of Schierbaums lived on a high hill in a rambling, two-story log house, once the home of his maternal grandparents, who were Allen McDaniel "Fox Dan" and Martha Caroline Grace Webb, and their twelve children, who were Allen's aunts and uncles -- all Webbs -- and, thus, the Christmas Tree Country folks called Allen's home The Fox Dan Webb Place.

The two boys in our tale held a special place in the family's eyes. After all, they were gifts from God, and, yes, it was true Kenneth Ray and Bennie were good little fellows, and the worst thing they *ever* did was reinvent -- modify -- the cabinet which held Mommie Katie's Eldridge, treadle, sewing machine. Now, they didn't actually change the *machine* on which Katie did her sewing -- *not one single whit!* They simply removed the two drawers on the left side and the two drawers on the right side of her machine's cabinet and declared them their personal property. And, no, they didn't *demolish* the drawers!

What they did do, you see, was tie some hay baling twine to the drawer knobs. Presto! The four wooden drawers became *wagons*! Using their imaginations, the boys became operative farmhands -- doing whatever boys found to do in a day's play. Their wagons were pulled -- not rolled -- across the floor, and, occasionally, one wagon would be slammed into another wagon and both would suffer a bit of damage. But things like that could be expected on a real farm in Christmas Tree Country!

Did someone ask what happened to all of the important stuff in the four drawers -- stuff like Katie's hard-to-come-by thread, needles, buttons, thimbles, and hooks and eyes? Don't fret about that. Before those drawers hit the floor, she took those things out of the hands of the boy farmers. And Katie put her valuables in a box or maybe in a brown, paper sack, and she put that box or sack up on a high shelf with her *one* good pair of scissors.

With that being done, the altered sewing machine cabinet stayed in its rightful place in the big front room of The Fox Dan Webb Place -- close to the light from a south window. There *were* four gaping slots, two on each side of the cabinet -- of no use to Katie or anyone. . . .

. . .but counting her blessings, Katie was just satisfied when her machine's long shutttle kept its rhythm and hummed properly -- "***chick-le, chick-le, chick-le, chick-le***" -- as she treadled. Her machine's sharp needle'd reach down into the shuttle and grab the thread and pull it out of the shuttle and guide it from the bottom to the top of her cloth -- a cotton flour sack or yard goods she'd bought at The Tunnel. And her needle'd go up and down and up and down and up and down -- making stitches. And this Christmas Tree Country wife and mother was thankful for ***ev-er-y*** stitch. Yes!

At times, her machine'd be out of time, and that meant her needle'd skip a stitch or two. True! Well, when that'd happen, she'd "run over" that seam again or stitch it by hand to fill in the weak places -- till she'd find the time to do better. For Katie, it was like the old saying: *It's all in a day's work!*

All of this had to be said to dismiss any stories about how Kenneth Ray and Bennie were guilty of tearing up the sewing machine and interfering with Mommie Katie's clothes making and quilt block piecing. With Mommie, their doing that would've been *nigh on* to an impossibility. After all, they were *her* boys -- and they were *nigh on* to perfect in her eyes!

And Mommie "made do" with what she had. Often, she'd oil her machine and do whatever she could to adjust its timing. When necessary, she'd put in a new needle. She'd dust what was left of her cabinet, and at all times, she'd take care of the *little* things -- and the boys were little. And she was thankful to have her growing boys *and* her sewing machine cabinet -- drawners or no drawers!

Now! The Christmas Tree Country tale got its start on a Friday, five days before Christmas Day in 1935. Mommie Katie and Daddy Allen'd spent most of that day wrapping sausage, tenderloin, and headcheese -- a good part of their middle-of-December hogkilling meat. Kenneth Ray and Bennie did their part, too. Mostly, though, they just jumped up and down and thought about how much fun they'd have going down to Granny's -- yes, Granny Lula Schierbaum's house -- in the wagon with Daddy.

Ooops! The wagon's ahead of the horse! Back up! *The wagon's ahead of the mules!* Before this wagon starts rolling, a few minor details need to be spelled out. The boys didn't hop off the featherbed and from under warm, homemade quilts one morning and say, "We're going down to Granny's!" And they didn't just climb up into the wagon and find all of the fresh hog meat already loaded up. That's not the way it happened!

Much effort had gone into the planning of this anticipated trip. *First*, as you already know, the two hogs'd been butchered. *Then*, the two hogs'd been dressed. No, not with clothing! They were. . .well, they. . .let's just say they. . . they'd been cut up into different parts, and, yes, they'd been cleaned up, sliced up or ground up, and were plenty good enough for a king's table. *Alright!* At that point, in a deliverable state, they were ready for the eating table, and Granny *had* a table -- *a long table*!

How happy Granny'd be! You need to understand that in Granny Lula's kitchen there were several mouths to feed. There was Grandpa Albert -- for starters. And Granny Lula and Grandpa Albert had three young Schierbaum children in the home, plus a great-grandma. And five older Schierbaum children were coming and going and getting married and bringing babies into the world, and they had to be *fed* -- and Granny cooked out from scratch three square meals a day. And, yes, Lord, she'd be thankful for the fresh hog meat for her table on Christmas Day!

Now, **ALLEN** -- the oldest of the ten Schierbaum children born to Lula and Albert -- didn't lay up a big store of fresh hog meat in the smokehouse, thinking only of himself and the other four in his family. No, he *and* Katie shared what they'd butchered with the rest of the folks and others, too. Who are *the rest of the folks and others, too?* Well, that'd be **JOHN**, who was Allen's brother, and John's wife, who was **Dellie**, and John and Dellie's four children -- **Mildred, Jimmy, Phyllis June, Alice Ruth.** And there was **BILL**, who was Allen's brother, and Bill's wife, who was **Gussie**. And there was **FRANK**, who was Allen's brother, and Frank's wife, who was **Mary**, and Frank and Mary's two children -- **Alice Mae** and **Frankie, Jr**. And there was **DAN**, who was Allen's brother, and Dan's wife, who was **Gertie**, and Dan and Gertie's boy, who

was **Chester Lee**. And on The Carson Place with **Mommie** and **Poppie**, there'd be **Blind Grandma Aslena Daniels,** who was Allen's paternal, widowed grandmother, and **MARY CAROLINE** and **MINNIE**, who were Allen's sisters, and **ROSCOE WESLEY**, who was Allen's baby brother.

Also, in and around The Brooks Home, there'd be **Bay** and **Rosa Mae Choate Reynolds Brooks**, who were Katie's mommie and poppie, and **Paul**, who was Katie's brother, and Paul's wife, who was **Margie**, and **James Waldo**, who was Katie's baby brother. And, sometimes at The Brooks Home, **Olen Reynolds** and **Earl** and **Robert** and **Ralph** Brooks would visit. And often **Lonzo** showed up, too.

SO! There on The Fox Dan Webb Place, two hogs'd been strung up and butchered. Stop! Stop! That didn't come until they'd been cornfed and weighed out at a "couple hundred" pounds -- on foot. Understand this! In Christmas Tree Country, the necessities of life didn't just fall down into the the smokehouse -- or into Allen's wagon in our tale -- and smell all sweet and end with a happy-ever-after story, no!

BUT, *with all of the hard part being done*, Allen hitched the team of mules to the wagon. He planned to carry some hog meat to the Albert and Lula Schierbaum home -- there on The Carson Place. He was sure his mommie'd have a good meal ready, even though she wouldn't have been expecting to have extras with their feet under the eating table. Yes, he and the boys'd eat dinner with the folks in the *middle* of the day, but there wouldn't be any lollygagging around and staying all day long. After a short visit and seeing the folks were up and on their feet, Allen'd load the boys into the wagon and head back home in time to get the milking done -- a pretty good while before dark.

Yes, and on their way back to The Fox Dan Webb Place, they'd do something *really* exciting -- that *something* being a once-a-year thing. They'd look along the sides of the road and find just the *perfect* Christmas tree, a cedar, of course, and one that would look *just right* -- standing there in the front room -- by the sewing machine.

Planning ahead, Allen sharpened his chopping ax, put it inside a toesack, and placed it "way up under" the wagon seat -- right there by his left foot. With that being done, all he'd have to do was eye the right tree and hop out of the wagon and chop down that tree and throw it on the wagon and haul it back home and show it to Katie and Geraldine. Plans had been made! Yes, plans had been made. . . !

After all of the groundwork -- and the boys' jumping up and down in clean long johns and overalls -- the trip began! With the mules all hitched up and all of the waving and good-byes being said and the treasure trove of fresh hog meat and Katie's bushel basket in the right place on the strawed floor of the wagon bed and the three travelers sitting down on the wagon seat -- *PHEW!* -- the best laid plans of man could roll on down the Johnson County dirt road. Yes!

The wagon was pulled by Ole Beck and Kate, a team of young, robust mules. They worked well together. But -- *right off the reel* -- you need to know that Ole Beck was the dictatorial mule of the team and more feisty than Kate. Oh, yes! That Beck had a mind of her own and was a "tad bit" more worldly than Kate. And -- somehow -- she'd learned to *trot*. Oh, yes! So, quite often Allen had to calm her down and remind her to "get ahold of herself" and he'd say, "Whoa, Beck! Whoa! **WHOA!** ***WHOA!***"

Well, Beck'd become quite vocal. She'd go on and on to Kate. Of course, Allen didn't understand mule snorts, but it would've been an eye opener for him if he

could've heard a mule translation when she was on one of her rants: *That Allen! I'd like to tell him a thing or two! He thinks he knows how to pull this wagon better than either one of us mules. I'd like to see him try to pull it! I'd like to see how he'd get along without you and me, Kate. Huuh! I just wish he'd not be so mule-headed. I wish he'd let me pull this wagon the way I want to. I like to trot! He tries to tell me what to do all of the time! He's got a lot of German in him, I think. A hardheaded German kraut he is! Huuh! For the life of me, I don't see why he won't let me trot!*

Quite truthfully, Allen wasn't the least bit impressed with Beck's trotting skills. But with how well she pulled the garden plow or a loaded wagon or a hay frame -- there in Christmas Tree Country -- he *was impressed!*

No, *on this trip*, Allen didn't want to "put up" with any of Beck's highfalutin trottin'. He figured the ruts in that dirt road might just catch a wagon wheel the wrong way and flip that whole wagon over on its side. Then they'd *all* be in trouble.

Can you imagine such a predicament? You can try, can't you? There'd be three people flying through the air and landing on the road or out in the ditch and being hit on the head by bulletlike packages of hog meat and whatever else that wasn't nailed down. Also, somebody could really get hurt if that ax fell just right! And there the mules would be -- hitched up to a wagon that was going nowhere -- and. . .well. . . !

So! Trotting was *out*, but the trip was *on*, and on that frigid day, Kenneth Ray and Bennie felt the sting of the cold air. They forfeited their seats of prominence on the wagon seat beside Daddy, sat down on the strawed wagon bed, and with all of their jumping up and down coming to a fast end, they *quickly* changed their minds about how *un*-cold a trip down to Granny's could be. From their mouths came frosty breaths. In an effort to keep from freezing, they opted for a warmer place on the wagon bed and covered their heads with Mommie's quilts -- to trap the warmth.

Clip-i-ty clop! *Clip-i-ty clop*! were the sounds made by the mules' hoofs.

Ting! Jingle! *Snap! Clang!* were the sounds of the harnesses and trace chains.

Cre-e-ak! *Cr-e-e-ak!* were the sounds of the wagon on its frame.

Well, anyway, everything was hunky-dory! They were on their way to Granny's! Clipity clopping along together, Ole Beck and Kate kept time with each other. Though the beats were unsynchronized, the clipity cloppings and jinglings and janglings and tinglings and snappings and clangings and creakings *were familiar sounds* -- *unharmonious*, yes, but *familiar*, nonetheless -- reassuring the passengers of their good fortune in traveling.

Included in the plans was a short, *short* stop at Lonzo's place. All along, Allen *knew* he'd do that, and, in that respect, Ole Beck had him figured out pretty well. Allen had a way of doing what *he* wanted to do, and he just hadn't bothered to take the time to discuss all of the particulars with Katie. Before leaving the backdoor of The Fox Dan Webb Place, he'd already decided they'd leave the southbound road to The Carson Place and turn off to the east and go down the steep, narrow, somewhat-of-a-road dirt road to Lonzo's dugout.

Kenneth Ray and Bennie hadn't ever seen Lonzo's place, but they imagined it was some-kind-of-a-house somewhere in the side of some high hill. They'd heard folks call it a *dugout*. Lonzo, they figured, dug out dirt and pitched it over to one side and

"hunkered up" inside a big hole when it rained or snowed or when it was dark and time to sleep a little bit.

Like most boys, they were fascinated with dirt and digging. These Christmas Tree Country excavators were busier than Christmas Tree Country moles! They'd dug a *lot* of holes and relocated dirt piles -- in the front yard or back yard or at the edge of Mommie's garden -- any place where the ground was "tobble" loose. They'd used Mommie's table spoons and Daddy's spade, and they'd dug ditches and gullies -- some fairly deep. They'd found all kinds of things -- rocks, nails, wire, can lids, walnut shells, pieces of glass, buttons, a horseshoe, three of Mommie's good spoons -- and Kenneth Ray said if they'd find a marble, it was going into *his* "bakker" sack.

And whenever Daddy'd talked to Mommie about making a stop at Lonzo's place, they were "all ears." Daddy knew the facts about the way Lonzo lived and what made Lonzo the way he was. Daddy said that Lonzo picked that place to make his home because it was close to a branch. And Daddy also allowed that all Indians *had* to live close to water, suggesting that Lonzo was part Indian, or a whole lot *like* an Indian.

Kenneth Ray and Bennie were somewhat like Indians, too, living outdoors as much as possible -- exploring land and mud puddles. Indians! They reasoned being Indians wouldn't be bad. They could still come home when it got dark and eat gravy and biscuits and then go back outside the next day and be Indians!

Remembering Lonzo, Katie'd fixed a good-sized package for him. Yes, Lonzo liked sausage, and she was sure Allen'd want to share some of their fresh meat with him. And she was certain Lonzo'd like to have a break every now and then from his regulars of fried squirrel and rabbit. So, in Lonzo's package Katie packed an extra dab of sausage, and she hoped that'd make him a few good meals.

Allen and Katie liked him, even though his ways might've seemed strange -- different from most folks. He lived alone and was on the move most of the time. Sometimes, he'd stay a few days with this family and that family, just wherever he'd find a friendly welcome. Yes, he was peculiar -- but peaceful -- and he was *neighborly*.

One thing enjoyable about Lonzo was his storytelling. He'd lean back on the two hind legs of a straight-back chair, spin yarns, and entertain his listeners. *"Ah, **yes**. . . !"* he'd say, moving from word to word of his recollections. *"**Ah, y-e-s-s!**"*

Of more importance, though, was Lonzo's extra help in cutting wood, gathering kindling, milking, slopping hogs, plowing, planting, harvesting, picking blackberries, doing garden work, "busheling up" walnuts, and helping with tasks at hand, merely for a place to sleep in the barn and a bite of food. You see? Both the friendly visitor and the hospitable visitees benefitted. That's the way it *was* in Johnson County!

Then, when the notion would hit him just right, Lonzo'd travel on -- walking to another place -- alone -- one, solitary human. Often, he fulfilled the folks' need for home deliveries to other folks in Christmas Tree Country. He carried personal messages of "Howdy!" and "Hello!" and news of who'd married, who'd found a new baby, who'd been sick, who'd died, and who'd said what. He also toted the in-season produce. Yes, with *some* reliability, turnips and turnip greens, potatoes, apples, walnuts, overripe peaches, and surplus foods passed from house to house because of Lonzo's roamings.

Now, the man traveling from his home on this **21st day of December in 1935** wasn't a by-chance passerby, walking on foot and heading for an unknown destination

No, the traveler was Allen, riding in a mule-drawn wagon with two rambunctious boys. Unlike Lonzo, Allen had a wife, three children, and a *large* family, interwoven and depending upon him for survival. Unlike Lonzo, Allen planned to return to his home on The Fox Dan Webb Place -- before it got too dark -- to finish his day's work and sleep in his own bed. But, *like* Lonzo, Allen *was* on a *delivery* trip and making unannounced visits to two homes in Christmas Tree Country -- a dugout and The Carson Place.

After traveling a few miles to the west and then turning to the left and going a short distance to the south, Allen began looking for some signs of a seldom-traveled dirt road, the lane leading off to Lonzo's dugout. He expected it'd be similar to the rest of the roadside -- grown up with bushes and with the slightest resemblance of a passable lane. When he *did see* the difficult-to-find exit, he slowed Ole Beck and Kate for a sharp, left turn and spoke to them: "Haw, Beck! Haw, Kate! *Haw! Haw!"*

At the lane's entrance was a narrow, natural arch, made up of intertwined tree branches which held up a shelflike canopy of aged, thick vines and vegetation. Carefully, Allen guided the team through the low-hanging space, and at his command, they headed down a steep grade. They were going east toward Lonzo's dugout which was down in a deep valley, close to a bluff and surrounded by a conglomeration of tall cedars, maples, and elms. Among those trees were some box elder, sassafras, walnut, oak, and pawpaw trees, too. And mixed in with the neglected lot were some low-cut, horizonally smooth tree stumps -- remains of trees Lonzo'd cut down for his wood pile.

The abrupt descent, made worse by a washed-out gully down its center, demanded that Allen rein in the mules with force. Abruptly, they found footing and stopped. The wagon swayed, creaked, and adjusted its load, allowing its contents to slide forward and downward -- toward the front of the wagon. *Lonzo's lane is in a bad shape,* Allen thought. *It's not much better than a cow path. I never thought it'd be this bad, but I guess we'll make it. I hope this wagon'll hold together!*

Like two dough balls, Kenneth Ray and Bennie rolled forward in their quilts and landed *under* the wagon seat. Allen stiffened himself, held the lines, and found himself standing and swaying from side to side.

"Whoa, Beck! Whoa, Beck!" he called.

"Daddy! Daddy!" they yelled.

"It's alright, boys. It's *alright!* We just hit a deep gully back there. Let me see what's happened here," Allen said. He first stood there in the wagon, looking from side to side. He then jumped down from the wagon, holding the lines to keep the team from moving forward. He fought his way through the brush, hoping to get a good look at the wagon wheels. *I think it's all still holding together,* he thought, *but I'll have to try to hold this team back and keep these wheels on the ridges. I'll have to figure out a way to stay out of that gully. It's a deep one, for sure.* With that thought in mind, he was up on the seat again and saying, "Well, let's go, boys! We'll just have to give it a try and see!"

Within minutes, the dugout and a slow-running branch came into view. "Whoa, Beck! *Whoa, Kate! Whoa!"* Allen said, sternly. If other mules would've been down there close to that dugout, they would've stopped, too -- dead in their tracks -- after hearing his demanding, business-sounding orders: "Whoa, Beck! Whoa, Kate! *Wh-o-oa!* ***Wh-o-o-o-ah, Beck!"*** But sometimes it'd take more than one whoa for Beck!

"Well! We're here, boys. Let's get out of the wagon for a spell. We won't waste too much time now." He looked up at the dark clouds, surprised. "I think we're going to have some fallin' weather before too long."

"Daddy?" Kenneth Ray asked. "What is *fallin'* weather?"

"Oh, Son, that's when it rains -- or gets cold and freezes and snows."

"Daddy!" Bennie said excitedly. "It's. . .hey! It's snowing *now!*"

Bennie was right! All of a sudden, through the still air snow began falling in huge flakes.

"Well! Children, this weather's coming out of nowhere! And it's coming fast! Let's see if we can round up Lonzo, and we'll get started back up that hill. Come on, boys! Lonzo!" he called, walking toward the dugout. "Lonzo! Oh! Lonzo!"

There was no answer.

"Lonzo?"

No answer. No sign of life came from the dugout.

Once more he raised his voice and called: "Lonzo? Oh, *Lonzo*!"

The unanswered calls and the lack of smoke coming from Lonzo's flue -- a black stovepipe -- provided clues that no one was around. "Lonzo?" Allen called out as he approached the door to the dugout. "Are you here?" Again he knocked. No answer came. He knocked harder. Still, no answer. *I hope Lonzo's not all "stove up" or sick or in a bad way,* he was thinking.

He knocked again. He waited. He pulled down on the latch. The heavy door opened slightly.

"Lonzo?" he said, speaking into the darkness of the dugout. "Are you here?"

Patiently, standing only inches behind him, Kenneth Ray and Bennie waited -- hoping for a chance to go inside to see a *real* dugout. Their chances of doing that seemed pretty slim when Daddy closed the door. Their chances died when he said, "Well, boys, I reckon Lonzo's not here. Let's load up in this wagon again. We'll have to get up that hill and get ourselves out of here. Get all covered up. You'll be all wet by the time we get down to your granny's. Yeah, this could just turn into a bad snow!" He glanced up at the sky. "It's really coming down, and it's likely to keep this up!"

Heavy snowflakes fell on everything in the wagon -- the quilts, the hog meat, and the bushel basket covered with the cloth. The ground, the rocks along the branch, and the steep incline to the main road were fast becoming white. Blotches of white gripped the bark on the trunks and limbs of leafless trees, and fast-falling flakes diminished the green of the cedars.

"Alright, boys! We'll get on out of here!"

Those were Allen's intentions. Obediently, Ole Beck and Kate followed his commands and attempted to pull their wagon load. Allen spoke to them sternly. They heaved, strenuously. He applied the strap. The mules strained. The wood frame of the wagon creaked slightly. But that wagon wheel didn't move -- not one *iota!*

"Well!" came a frustrated response from Allen's lips. He was off the wagon seat and on the ground, instantly. It didn't take long for him to figure out what was wrong. He discovered a hind wagon wheel was down in a hole -- behind a large, branch rock. *Hmmm! Well. . . !* he said to himself. *Yeah, I guess Ole Beck must've backed up a little ways when I was doing all of that knocking and yelling for Lonzo. I'll be!*

Again he tried to free the wagon wheel, this time by leading the mules and coaxing them to bear down hard. As if it had a mind of its own, the wheel refused to budge. His efforts failed.

Anxiously, he looked toward the west -- toward the steep incline. By then, the snow was coming down in sizeable clumps and mixed with icy pellets, hindering him from seeing more than a few feet. A dense, foglike blur settled like a cloud among the tall trees. He felt uneasy. He *knew* he should have that wagon up at the top of that hill and out on the main road and going south toward The Carson Place.

"Well!" came a third verbal response. "Boys, I'd say we oughta get in out of this. I've got snow on my eyelashes! You boys, jump down. Come here, Bennie. Come on, Kenneth Ray. Head for the door. It'll be better in there than it is out here. We'll stay here for awhile!"

The inside of the dugout -- about a twelve by twelve -- was dark. Allen looked around. He saw Lonzo's coal oil lamp. Allen had matches -- *STRIKE!* -- and the light from the lamp revealed a bin of potatoes and apples, bunches of onions, a jug of water, a box of salt, a can of coal oil, and one straight-back chair. On a small table in the northeast corner were a water bucket, a dipper, a cast iron skillet, two pans, forks and spoons, one "pretty sharp" knife, and two plates -- Lonzo's hodgepodge of kitchen utensils.

Out "a little ways" from the wall in the northeast corner was Lonzo's King heater with its black stovepipe running up through the ceiling of the dugout. Allen filled the heater with dry kindling, sprinkled coal oil on that, and -- *STRIKE!* -- a fire blazed.

In the northwest corner, a "pretty good ways away" from the King heater -- that means at least three feet away -- was a crude bed. Hanging from the log ceiling were thick, twisted ropes attached to more twisted ropes, tied from side to side and from bottom to top. Ticking, heavy quilts, and a couple of pillows lay on top of the suspended ropes -- Lonzo's bed.

On the southeast wall to the left of the door was the dugout's one window -- a piece of glass -- about a four by four, which allowed Allen and the boys a view of the stranded wagon, the powerless team of mules, and the slow-running branch trickling southward along the left side of the dugout. The one door to the dugout opened in the center of the south wall.

But from Allen, there came no complaints. The King heater seemed to be in pretty good shape -- good for a King heater. From the looks of the stovepipe, he figured Lonzo'd been to The Tunnel and picked up a brand new stovepipe for the winter. The pipe didn't show any rusty places or any signs, as far as he could tell, that it'd *ever* been red hot. And after the fire "got to going," he smelled the black paint burning off. That meant it *was new!* He felt pretty certain Lonzo'd hooked it up right with a good damper, and he was hoping it'd draw and carry the smoke. The heat of the stove -- kept inside by a roof, a door, a window, and four bare walls -- he considered a blessing.

All along, Allen was thinking about his quandary. After warming up -- both physically and mentally -- he stepped out of the doorway onto the flat, branch rock surface to assess his dilemma. Again, he looked at the incapacited team.

"Well!" came his fourth response. "I'll have to figure out a way to get us out of here. I don't. . .I don't see how. . .but right now, I'd better look after these mules."

And that's what he did. And there they stood, hitched to the stranded wagon. And, no, *they* hadn't moved! They *couldn't*! And he couldn't hold back the snow storm. But he knew he had to take care of first things first. "Hmmm!" he said and sighed. And Ole Beck glanced at him, sideways. She snorted as he led her and Kate to the branch. He waited as they lowered their heads and drank. He then led her and Kate to a corner post -- one of two cedar timbers which propped up the dugout's overhang. That trimmed-up, cylindrical piece of a Christmas tree became their hitching post.

Relentlessly, the snow fell. His overshoe tracks and the mules' hoofprints to the branch and to the dugout post were bold in the snow -- but only for a short while. The snowflakes refused to be outdone by the mules' tracks or his. As quickly as he carried an armful of straw from the wagon to the mules, his tracks were barely visible -- only slight indentations. And a second armful of straw was hand delivered to the mules, and, immediately, the traces of boot prints were erased.

He returned to the wagon, knowing that Katie, thinking ahead, had packed food in a bushel basket. The scene from the early morning flashed through his memory. He'd finished milking the cows and left the cream can on the back porch. Then he'd gone out to slop the hogs, and when he came back into the kitchen, Katie was emptying the cream can. There on the kitchen table she'd set a quart fruit jar -- full of the still-warm morning's milk. She'd remarked, "Now, Allen, this is just in case the boys'd get thirsty!" He remembered he'd chuckled, but Katie was unruffled, and she went on to say, "And I've put in a little dab of something to eat, too -- just in case somebody'd get hungry!"

Oh, yes! He'd *thought* all of her last minute doings were unnecessary -- and amusing. But stranded in Lonzo's dugout and at the mercy of the elements, he was swift in saying, "I'm glad she *didn't* listen to me when I told her that was just foolishness for her to pack up all of that stuff. How'd she know to. . . ? Lord, I thank You for Katie!"

After knocking off snow and moving misplaced packages of hog meat, he found the bushel basket. Yes, it was on the floor of the wagon bed and still in one piece -- its contents covered with Katie's cloth! "Katie's been good to me -- good to look after me and these children. There's not any woman in the world like her! Katie's been good -- and the *Lord's* been good!" he said, repeating himself, unashamed. He continued his one-way reiteration as he left more short-lived tracks on his way to the dugout.

And when he opened the door, he thanked the Lord again -- for Kenneth Ray and Bennie. He saw his two fine boys, waiting for him. "Say, children! Here's stuff your mommie put into this basket. Are you hungry?"

Without saying a word and without washing their hands, they reached for the biscuits. Four sausage-egg biscuits later, Allen checked the basket's contents. Six sausage-egg biscuits were left. Allen ate two, leaving four for them. *Just like the five loaves and two fishes in the Bible,* he thought.

His memory carried him back to Katie again, and he thought of how she'd read the Bible to him after the work'd been done up -- after supper and after the coal oil lamp was lit and after the popcorn was popped. "Katie! Yes, she a *good* reader!" he said. That comment came out of nowhere, spontaneously -- like a continuation of what he'd been saying moments before. "Even when she's tired and all, she'll read the Bible to me."

Carefully, he unwrapped Katie's glass fruit jar and decided it wasn't cracked anywhere. Kenneth Ray reached for it, took a few swallows, smacked his lips, and handed it to Bennie. Milk dribbled down Bennie's chin, but he drank some more. Allen took the jar from Bennie and waited before putting the Mason lid in place and tightening its ring and returning the half-empty jar to its place in Katie's basket.

"Boy, that milk is *good*!" Bennie said. "My belly's full!"

"Daddy," Kenneth Ray asked, "don't *you* want some milk, too?"

No, Allen didn't want any milk. He'd leave the milk for *them* -- for later. *I can just drink water*, he thought. He then picked up Lonzo's water bucket and left the dugout.

From the window, Kenneth Ray and Bennie watched as he dipped the bucket into the branch and swirled the water around and around. That water he dumped on the ground. He dipped and swirled a second time, filled the bucket with the clear branch water, and walked back toward the dugout. Almost immediately, his tracks did *their* disappearing act.

Late afternoon hours settled over the isolated dugout. Warmth from the King heater soon forced the unexpected visitors to remove their heavy jumpers and caps, gloves, and buckle-up overshoes. Three spike nails on the wall behind the stove served as hangers for the slightly damp jumpers and caps.

The dugout's floor -- hard, slick, bare ground from years of being broom-swept -- became the perfect place for drawing a round circle. Lonzo's walnuts in their crusty shells served as marbles, although they lacked smoothness and produced red thumb knuckles.

As Allen watched his boys, he was thinking of how he'd tell them they'd be spending the night -- or maybe longer -- in the dugout, away from home and without Mommie and Geraldine. Allen wished. . . .he wished they could all be at home! But he didn't have high hopes of getting his wish.

Knowing they were safe with Daddy, Kenneth Ray and Bennie were content. They weren't thirsty, hungry, or cold. The King heater devoured wood, and the snow filled the tracks, and Daddy's jumper got damp, and the water bucket and teakettle needed to be filled, but their world was a game of marbles.

Inevitably, overshadowed by tall trees and the blanket of snow, the dugout fell victim to the short December day. Soon, its creeping blackness enveloped the mules, the branch, the steep incline, the main road, and reached out to paralyze all of Christmas Tree Country.

With darkness, suppertime rolled around. The four sausage-egg biscuits sufficed. Kenneth Ray and Bennie drank the milk from the quart jar. Allen drank water. Apples from Lonzo's bin satisfied the remaining feelings of hunger.

Outside, the mules were in their places, tied to the post. They needed food and water, too. In *their* places at the window, the boys watched Daddy untie the team, lead them to the branch and back to the "hitching" post, and lay more straw on the ground for them to eat. They watched him fill the water bucket with branch water They saw how quickly the snow was falling, filling the imprints of Daddy's big boots, and how Ole Beck and Kate were standing with their hoofs and ankles *way down* in the snow.

Without recourse, Allen planned for a stay in the dugout. *I'm not going to leave these children here alone or wag them around out here in the dark -- not tonight.* he thought. *We've got this roof over our heads. They'll be better off if we just stay here and I can think about this. . . !*

He counted the pluses and the minuses. There was Lonzo's wood supply -- elm, oak, cedar -- already cut and stacked against the outside wall next to the door. He thanked the Lord for that blessing. And Lonzo's potatoes and apples and the fresh hog meat in the stranded wagon prompted him to give thanks to the Lord, once again.

A way to keep warm. . .and food to eat. . .! *Lord,* he thought, *You know just what I'm up against. We're alright down here, but poor ole Katie's up there with Geraldine. There's all of that milking to be done. . .and the stoves. . .and the wood. . . and the water. . .and Katie doesn't know where we are. She'll be scared to death. . . .and worried, too. What am I going to do, Lord? I need Your help. . . !*

His prayer-thoughts continued. His tracks in the snow continued. They led from the dugout to the branch, from the branch to the dugout, from the dugout to the mules, from the mules to the wagon, from the wagon to the mules, and back to the dugout. Finally, wood, water, and a package of meat were carried inside. His wet jumper coat, cap, and gloves drooped from the spike nails behind the King heater. His overshoes sat close to the woodbox. His prayer-thoughts continued. . . .

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Son?"

"Daddy," Kenneth Ray asked, "when are we going down to *Granny's* house?"

"Well, you see, Son," Allen paused. "We're going to stay here for a *little* while, and *then* we'll see. . . ." Sitting down in Lonzo's straight-back chair, he pulled the boys onto his lap -- Kenneth Ray on his right and Bennie on his left.

"Daddy?"

"What is it, Bennie?"

"Uh. . .Mommie and Geraldine --"

"Oh, they're at home, Son. You boys, you sit here on my lap. Just close your eyes."

In no time, he felt them relax. *Fine children,* he thought, looking at them, *and good, healthy boys, too. Let me carry you to that bed. . . .and take off these shoes. . .and cover you up. . . .* He sighed, heavily, and spoke to himself. *It's been a long day. And. . .Katie. . .I wonder what's going on up there at the house with her. . . and Geraldine. I'd say it's about 6:30 by this time. But I don't know. . . . if I did, I'd wind up Lonzo's clock and set it. . . .well. . .I'd say it's getting on up close to seven or so. . . .*

Another long look at the sleeping boys seemed necessary. He walked to the door, opened it, and leaving it ajar, he stood beneath the dugout's overhang. He could hear the splashing sound of the running water in the branch, the slight stamping of the mules' hoofs, and the crashing of a tree limb. The brightness of the snow effected some light, allowing him to see Ole Beck and Kate -- tied to the post.

"Well. . . ! he said, in deep thought.

As he closed the dugout's heavy door, its bottom scraped, reluctantly, across the dirt floor.

Noisily, the door's large hinges made a grinding sound -- rusty bolts against metal.

Once inside, Allen was surprised by the dead silence in the crude shelter.

His ears rang.

He felt trapped.

Like the warmth of the heater and the light of the coal oil lamp, he and the boys were captured.

At the mercy of the paralyzed wagon and the heavy snow, he felt helpless. Helpless? Yes, helpless. . .and worried. . .and tired. . .

And he was thirsty, too. But he could satisfy his thirst. He held the water bucket to his lips and enjoyed the taste of the cold branch water. He stretched and lifted his arms, and with his fingers he touched the rough-hewn planks of the dugout's ceiling.

The straight-back chair called him. Soon, he was like the boys -- drowsy.

Almost unconscious, he roused. *I wonder what time it is?* he said to himself. *I see these little fellows are already sound asleep! I'd say I oughta "bank down" this stove and check the damper and blow out this lamp.*

On the dirt floor by the bed sat his shoes. On the feathertick he lay on the edge of the crude bed.

For a place to keep the boys warm and let them sleep, he was thankful. Bennie's place was in the middle. Kenneth Ray lay next to the wall. He could hear the even breathing of the boys. His could hear the steady beats of his heart.

He was speaking the Lord's name as he went to sleep: ". . .*Lord!*"

And all was quiet.

~ ~ ~

Tick, tock! Tick, tock! Tick, tock!
One...! Two...! Three...! Four...! Five...! Six...! Seven...!

Katie'd been listening. She'd counted the strikes. And she'd heard a noise outside! The sounds of footsteps on the back porch made her exhale a sigh of relief. She'd been waiting for hours! Hurriedly, she carried Geraldine toward the backdoor, *expecting* to see Allen with Kenneth Ray and Bennie.

Instead, there was a knock on the door. That surprised her. *Allen wouldn't knock on the door!* she thought. *But -- it might be Allen!*

Then she heard someone saying, "Howdy! Howdy! Howdy, folks!

And the backdoor, always unlocked, was pushed open. There stood Lonzo. Surprised, she stammered, "Oh. . .uh. . . Lonzo!" Thinking Allen'd be coming through the doorway *at any second* -- somewhere right behind Lonzo -- she was friendly. "Why, howdy, Lonzo! Where's Allen?"

"Allen? Well, I don't know, Katie. Uh. . .I. . .I don't know. I was. . .I was just. . .I just had this sack of walnuts for you, Katie."

"*Walnuts?*" she asked, puzzled. She'd been *certain* she'd heard Allen, and here Lonzo was -- talking about *walnuts* -- telling her he didn't know anything about Allen! She stared at him with a blank look on her face.

"Yeah, Katie, I just figured you might make some use of these walnuts for Christmas -- for the divinity candy."

Bewildered, Katie looked at him. Lonzo was waiting for her to say something. She blurted out, "Come in, Lonzo! Come on in and get warm. I. . .I just *thought* you were Allen. . .and the boys. They left here pretty early this morning, going down to Lula and Albert's. Allen told me to "get up" the cows, and I did -- a good while before it started snowing so hard. I guess that must've been. . .I guess it was around one o'clock -- or maybe a little before. Allen said he'd be back about four -- to milk and all. And it's a little after seven right now. I've not milked yet. . . .but. . . I don't know, Lonzo."

Lonzo -- wanting to help -- said, "Katie, I'll go ahead and get the milking started. That'll help Allen that much when he does get here. He'll be tired, I know. This snow's hard to put up with. And it just started in like -- well, I don't know what! It's kept this up for -- for a good six hours now. Katie, where are Allen's cream cans and milk bucket?"

"Well, now, Lonzo. . ."

He took Allen's lantern from the nail on the back porch wall, checked his jumper pocket for matches, and picked up the cream cans and the milk bucket. As he walked away from the house and into the snowy night, he was saying, "Allen oughta be back by now. I guess it's a good bit after seven thirty. *Ah! Y-e-s-s!* Allen oughta be back by now! Well, I'd say something just might've happened!"

Time passed. Geraldine was asleep in the bed, and Katie was in the kitchen when he carried in two cream cans, neither one full. "The cows are off," he told her. "Even that good little Jersey cow, too. . .yeah, well, it's this cold weather, I reckon. And I see Allen's not back yet. Well! I don't know!"

He left the kitchen. Shortly, Katie heard the door open again, and in came Lonzo with an armful of wood. After his four trips to the wood pile, both woodboxes were stacked high.

Once again, Katie was in her kitchen, alone with her thoughts. "Oh, Lord," she began, "I'm starting to get a bit uneasy! Allen's had *plenty* of time, and this is just not *like him!* He must've had some trouble. And the boys. . .the boys've not had any supper. And Allen'll be hungry. I'm uneasy. *This is just not like Allen!* That's for sure. Well, I'll take care of this little dab of milk and wash up these cans. And there's not one drop of milk in *this* can. And I. . .I. . .I just wish this snow'd just let up some!"

She glanced at the clock. It's ticking was loud -- a clanging in her ears!

But, then, she heard footsteps at the backdoor. "There's Allen *right now*!" she said, relieved.

Instead, Lonzo quietly entered the kitchen with a full water bucket. "Katie, this'll hold you through the night. I've shut up the hens and slopped the hogs. You got eight eggs. A couple froze. Allen's got that one big sow shut up in that back stall. I'd reckon from the looks of things -- well, she's trying to "find pigs." She's got plenty of feed and water. I'm going to go on down to the barn and get a dab of rest. When Allen comes in, you can tell him all the work's been done up for today. Oh, and, Katie, I left a few corncobs and a good bit of dry kindling out here on the back porch." The door was opened and closed, and Lonzo quietly slipped out of the house.

The only sound she heard was the ticking. But she was listening for Allen.

"Now, Lord," Katie said, "I just don't know *what* to think about this. I'm uneasy about Kenneth Ray and Bennie. I'm worried, Lord! They might be cold. . . .I always *did* feel a bit worried about them going down there today, Lord. I didn't have any idea we'd get this kind of snow. Well. . .Allen didn't either. My!"

She stood at the window, looking to the west. She went to the backdoor, opened it, and listened. She heard what she thought were deer, maybe several deer -- running from the north and to the south -- and they seemed to be passing by the big Christmas tree at the southwest corner of the house.

She strained her ears -- wanting to hear *the wagon and the team* coming from the west. The only sounds she heard, though, were the sounds of her breathing.

"Well! Now, Lord!" she said, meaning: *Lord, this is enough of this!*

Upon returning to the front room, she first looked at Geraldine. From the front room to the kitchen and from the kitchen to the front room she paced. Wood was added to the stove. The damper was shut off. More steps were taken from the front room to the kitchen -- back and forth and back and forth.

"The water bucket's full, and this stove'll be alright until Allen and the boys'll get home. I'm going to get up here on this bed with Geraldine and rest my legs. I guess I oughta blow out that lamp," she said softly. "Lord, I don't want to burn down this house. I guess I oughta make sure that stove damper's all the way off. Oh! I'll just depend on the Lord!"

Under the covers in The Fox Dan Webb House, Katie lay -- wearing the clothes she'd worn all day. Close by her was Geraldine. With no troubles, Geraldine slept. Katie, finally -- after talking to the Lord -- let *her* eyes close. In her prayers, she called out names of her mother and father and *lots of other names, too.* Her last words were: "Lord, please take care of all of us tonight -- Allen, Kenneth Ray, and Ben --!"

And Katie was silent. . . .

During the middle of the night, she roused. Immediately, she thought of Allen and the boys. Tears filled her eyes. Fear gripped her. She couldn't keep from crying. and, eventually, she was sobbing. She so hoped Geraldine would stay asleep!

The moist pillow felt cold against her face, but she couldn't hold back her tears. Her nose was "stopped up." Her head was pounding!

Mommie and Poppie! she thought. *I wish I could talk to Mommie and Poppie.* But they were a long way from her, down in the direction of The Tunnel. Katie was sure, though, that they -- especially her *poppie* -- would know how to help.

"I've --I've -- I've got to get up and blow my nose!" she said, moving easily and being as quiet as possible to keep from waking up Geraldine. "This house is dark. and I

can't see a thing. . . .but I *know* I put Allen's handkerchiefs on this clothesline behind this stove -- today. Oh, Lord! And I need to look at this heating stove *one more time*."

Yet, she wasn't surprised when Geraldine called, "Mommie?"

To comfort her, Katie crawled back into bed. That heating stove'd have to wait its turn! Geraldine needed her. Time passed. The nighttime hours seemed endless for Katie. The questions, the stillness, and the uncertainty overwhelmed her.

Her heart was pounding, wildly. She listened for outside sounds, but she listened in vain.

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And a short distance to the south, in another part of Christmas Tree Country, darkness claimed a dugout. The blackness, however, couldn't stifle the roaring and rumbling of the locomotive on The Big Four Railroad. The noisemaker on its heavy wheels with its loaded cars was headed north.

Its shrill screaming filtered through the walls: "Oo-ooo-*ooh*! Oo-ooo-*ooh*!"

Blasts of chugging and powerful din escorted the monstrous machine on the rails. From the southwest to the northeast, noises and vibrations advanced toward The Tunnel -- the village and home of an under-the-road, man-made, railroad tunnel.

To Allen, the noisome racket seemed more intense than usual. He'd slept *hard* there in the dugout -- until the whistle blew. It woke him, suddenly, and from that moment on, sleep was elusive. Worry took its place. Prayer took the place of worry.

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Katie, too, heard the locomotive. She could see it in her mind's eye. It was rolling along at a good speed. She assumed it'd already crossed The Breeden Trestle, a railroad bridge a short distance to the south of The Brooks Home in which Katie was born and raised. It was approaching the long hill. It was picking up some speed. She thought, *It'll slow down when it starts up that long hill.* And, as she thought, it did!

She expected to hear its wailing warning: "Oo-ooo-*ooh*! Oo-ooo-*ooh*!"

The piercing sound glided across to the northwest and moved right over The Fox Dan Webb Place. She wondered, *Is anybody else hearing this ole train on The Big Four Railroad? Is another soul hearing it? Anybody besides me?* She had no desire to sleep. However, she did close her eyes and talk to the Lord.

Tick, tock! Tick, tock! Tick, tock!
One...! Two...! Three...! Four...!

Accustomed to waking early, and after being awake for hours, Katie felt compelled to dismiss any comforts afforded by the warm bed. She covered Geraldine and touched the cold, linoleum floor with her bare feet. *Why, I'm already dressed,* she thought. *I've got to get around here and light this lamp.* She moved from place to place where duty called. *Well, thank the Lord! This heating stove's still got a few live coals in it. I'll have this stove going in no time. . . .and then I'll get a fire going in that kitchen stove with a little coal oil on some kindling. Where is the kindling. . . ? Oh*

yeah! Lonzo said something about some corncobs and kindling on the back porch. Well, I'll bring some inside and get this kitchen stove going and fix us a bite to eat. Lord, I need your help this morning. . . !

Out of habit, Katie began thinking about breakfast. She went first to the smokehouse for fresh sausage. Before she washed her hands, she checked to see that Geraldine was resting. And she decided the heating stove needed *more* wood. And she looked at Geraldine again.

Soon, Katie was in her kitchen -- filling the blue granite coffee pot with water and coffee grounds and turning over a good dozen or more sausage patties.

Katie worked. Geraldine slept.

Tick, tock! Tick, Tock! Tick, tock!
One...! Two...! Three...! Four...! Five...!

Katie'd heard the five strikes. And then she heard: "Howdy! Howdy, Katie! It's just me! Katie? Katie, it's just me! Katie?"

"Come on in, Lonzo! You come on in!"

"Well, Katie, for the life of me I can't figure out what could've happened to Allen. I kept thinking I'd hear him pull in any minute -- last night. He might've just *had* to stay down at Lula's -- because of this snow. You know? Or maybe he had trouble with the tongue on that wagon, or maybe that one wagon wheel fell off. You just never know. *You just never know*! Well, now, you try to keep from worrying about it every minute. . ..yeah. My! Katie, you've got this house good and warm. Yeah, well, I'm going to hurry up and get the milking done up and go looking."

"Now, Lonzo, I've just about got some breakfast ready. All I need to do is get a few biscuits going in the oven. Maybe you oughta try to eat a bite."

"Naw, Katie, I'm going to milk first. I guess you're alright? And the baby is, too? Katie, you look a little bit peaked this morning. You're not sick, are you? Well, I'll see that you've got yourself plenty of water and wood in before I take off out of here."

Out the backdoor Lonzo went, carrying a lantern, one milk can, and the milk bucket. Into the front room Katie went to see if Geraldine was still asleep. From the front room to the kitchen, Katie paced back and forth. Feeling exhausted, she lay down, touched Geraldine, and talked to the Lord -- again. First, she thanked the Lord for telling Lonzo to stop off at The Fox Dan Webb Place. . . .

The smell of sausage and boiling coffee drifted from the kitchen into the front room -- calling folks to gather around the kitchen table. The striking of the clock announced that another breakfast time was *long* overdue! She counted six strikes, reminding her of passing hours -- twenty-two hours -- with no sign of Allen and the children.

Just look at me -- piled up here in bed at six o'clock in the morning! she thought, scolding herself: *I belong in that kitchen!* And, that's where she was -- after she washed her face, put on clean clothes, combed her hair, brushed off the loose hairs, put on a clean apron, and washed her hands.

Her kitchen was quiet. Allen wasn't in his usual place, sitting there by the cookstove, holding Geraldine. Her blue crock mixing bowl reminded her of the ones

who weren't there for breakfast. "Allen always eats five biscuits," she whispered, softly. She felt a lump in her throat when she looked at his coffee cup and saucer. And there his plate was -- empty! And Kenneth Ray and Bennie weren't buttering their biscuits. . . . and reaching for the platter of eggs. . .and trying to dip gravy from the bowl.

The shuffling of feet at the door, the sound of Lonzo's voice -- "Katie?" -- and the sight of the cream can and milk bucket brought her back to her senses. She had to be in control of things because Allen wasn't there to help make things right. *One thing at a time!* she told herself. *Lonzo's got to have a bite to eat. I'll fry up some eggs. I'll stir up some white gravy -- Webb sop as Allen calls it -- and I'll "wad up" a few biscuits. . . .*

"Katie, I'll be pulling out of here pretty soon."

"No, Lonzo, not until you *eat* something."

"Well, then, I'll just *take* something and be on my way," he said, leaving the kitchen. "I've still got to handle a few chores, but *that won't take me long!*"

And Katie felt sure it wouldn't take long for her to whip up a batch of biscuits. She'd first rinse out and dry her blue crock mixing bowl. She'd then rinse out and dry her black, rectangular-shaped biscuit pan. She'd pour grease into that pan, slide it into her oven, and it'd be hot by the time she'd be ready for it.

From her covered grease bowl, she'd take bacon grease. That'd go into the skillet in which she'd fried the sausage. With everything on hand, she was ready for her blue crock mixing bowl. Having used that bowl *many times,* she pretty well knew what seemed to be about the *right amounts* of what she'd put into it. All she needed to do was "stir up" her flour, baking powder, salt, lard, and milk -- with her fingers -- and separate what seemed to be the *right amount* for a good biscuit and then lay each *right amount* side by side and from end to end in her hot, greased, biscuit pan. Then, she'd dip a spoon into the hot sausage-bacon grease in her gravy skillet, and with that same spoon, she'd grease each portion with *plenty* of the salty grease. And it wouldn't take long for her hot oven to produce fifteen, large, golden, fluffy biscuits -- Katie's biscuits.

And Katie was right! It didn't take long for her to "wad up" a few biscuits!

Ten of them, laid aside for Lonzo, were split, filled with egg and sausage, wrapped, and packed in a sack. A quart fruit jar of black, sweetened coffee pressed against the biscuits.

"Well," Katie said, "that's the best I can do -- under the circumstances. At least it's clean!"

Suddenly, her strength was renewed. By seeing both of the woodboxes stacked high, and having a full water bucket, and knowing the milking was all done, and believing Lonzo could find Allen and the boys, she felt encouraged. And, there *she* was, doing her part -- applying the Golden Rule -- and thinking of Lonzo's empty belly and how he was hungry and how he'd *be* hungry while he was out there scouring around.

She heard footsteps on the back porch and heard Lonzo talking to himself as he came into the kitchen: "Well, now. . .I'm not going to waste any more time. Katie, I fed the cows and turned them out. The chickens and hogs are alright, too. And Allen's got that big sow in that back stall. She's not found any pigs -- not yet, anyway. You know you oughtn't go in there with her, don't you, Katie? She's that mean sow."

While handing him the full sack, she remarked, "Yeah, I guess I forgot all about

ole sow. Allen's always said she's bad about rolling over on her pigs. But I can't do anything about that. Allen could, but. . .here, Lonzo, is something warm for you to eat." Her lips quivered as she said, "I thank you for doing this for us, Lonzo."

"Aw, Katie! Yeah. . .and I'll say this is a *hot* sack of food! I thank *you* -- much! You're a good cook, Katie, like your mother. Rosa Mae Brooks is a *good* cook, for sure. I've had a lot of *fine* vittles at Bay Brooks's house. *Ah! Yes!* Well, now, I'll be on out of here. I'd say this snow might just be trying to let up. That'll help me find fresh tracks."

The backdoor closed, waking Geraldine. "Mommie! Mommie?" she called. "Uh. . .Mommie? Where's Kenneth Ray and Bennie? Where's Daddy?"

"Now, you remember they went down to Granny's, don't you?" She disclosed nothing more, not wanting to upset Geraldine. "I'm glad you slept all night long, Hon. You *really* slept a long time. Thank the Lord! I'm thinking you're likely hungry, Hon. I've got some breakfast ready. Let's find some warm good clothes for you!"

Changing from a flannelette gown to a full slip, a long-sleeved winter dress, bloomers, long cotton socks, and shoes, Geraldine was ready for a cold day. After dressing and personal hygiene matters met Katie's satisfaction and hands were washed, the two sat down to eat -- Katie in her chair and Geraldine in the highchair Katie's poppie'd made for Kenneth Ray.

Katie said, "Our heavenly father. . .Lord, we thank you for this food --!"

"A - men!" Geraldine said.

Katie smiled. The child's innocence brought tears -- burning tears -- to Katie's eyes. She blinked, chuckled, and blinked some more.

For Katie this breakfast was different. She was worried, but she wanted to keep Geraldine from knowing *any times* of worry. And that was her day-to-day concern for Kenneth Ray and Bennie, too. *So much is ahead of this child,* she thought, looking closely into Geraldine's green eyes. *She's got green eyes -- like Allen's. And Bennie's are gray. And Kenneth Ray's are brown -- like mine. Hmmm! These children'll all have a lot to go through. Even the Bible says so: '. . .Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. . . .' They're little for such a short time. I just hope the boys are not cold and hungry or wet and out in this snow. Lord, please help Allen. . . !*

~ ~ ~

As Lonzo trudged through the snow, he ate five sausage-egg biscuits, standing still only long enough to take a few swallows of the warm coffee. He smacked his lips. "That Katie *is* a good cook," he said aloud. "She knows I like my coffee black and really strong with plenty of sugar." He rambled on, talking to himself. "I'd better stop off up here at the first house I come to and tell those folks that Allen's out here somewhere and that Katie's worried. I'd say I'm a good bit worried, too. *Ah! Y-e-e-s!"*

After making tracks in the snow for a mile or so, he made his first stop. Quickly, Lonzo scrambled down the bank, climbed over the woven-wire fence, and "hightailed it" straight across the field toward the hog lot to where a man was slopping his pigs.

Spending little time on saying *howdy* and *how-d'-ye-do,* the two men got right down to business. They stood near the fence. The man leaned on a sassafras fence post while Lonzo explained the details. Lonzo, too, decided to rest for a minute, and he found a fence post for *himself.* They talked. They looked down toward the ground. They shook their heads.

"So they'd headed down to Lula and Albert's?" the man asked. "But Katie's alright? And the little Schierbaum girl is, too?"

"Yes, and I oughta be on my way."

"Say, Lonzo, you take this mule -- or take this horse. Take either one you want. I'll help you get all saddled up."

At first, the man's offer seemed too extravagant for Lonzo's style, but he finally agreed and thanked him. Lonzo added, "Maybe I can return the favor someday."

"You're doing that right now, Lonzo, by hunting for Allen and those two boys. Those Schierbaums are good folks. Say, Lonzo. . . I'll saddle up and ride over here and let *these* folks know." He pointed toward the west. "They've got three strapping boys, you know, and they can help -- if they're not out squirrel hunting or something."

Anxious to be enroute, Lonzo nodded, clutched his food sack, and glanced back to see the mule's hoofprints in the snow. *"Ah! Yes!* This here mule gets along pretty fair. It won't take *me* long. I'll cut off up here a piece and go off down through the woods -- straight across that one branch -- and get myself on over to Lula and Albert's place. *Ah! Yes!*"

~ ~ ~

Inside the dugout, Allen was going about the business of meeting the new day head-on. Having been awakened by the locomotive's whistle, he'd lit the lamp long before daylight. The King heater met its match with him. He kept it romping! Just as Allen wanted, its rip-roaring fire quickly reduced the dry wood to smoldering bits of refuse and waste.

Somewhat nervous, he'd touch the stovepipe often. He'd look to see if it was getting red, and he kept a close eye on the damper. He didn't want to see that pipe and ceiling get too hot and -- maybe -- cause a fire.

Happening *long* before daylight and while Kenneth Ray and Bennie slept, Allen moved quickly, scooping the fire's castaways into Lonzo's coal bucket. Through the darkness he hurried, carrying bucket after bucket of glowing, burned chunks and cinders and coals to one spot in the snow. Each time he'd dump a bucket of the red hot pieces, he'd hear sizzling and see steam rising. The clumps left their calling cards by leaving a mound of dull, black waste and a ring of wet, gritty dirt. Gradually, Allen noticed the pile *did seem to be getting bigger,* and he felt *encouraged!*

He looked toward the dugout. *I reckon I'd better see about the boys, and I'd say it's about time to put more wood in that stove. And the way that King heater eats up the wood, I'll have another bucket to dump pretty soon. But it'd feel pretty good to just sit down and warm up,* he thought, and entered the dugout.

Awake and sitting up, Kenneth Ray said, "Hey! Oh! I know where we are! I went to sleep, didn't I, Daddy?" From under the covers and over Bennie he crawled.

jumped to the dirt floor, and climbled onto Allen's lap. Shortly, Bennie joined them.

That made Allen feel good! A thought ran through his mind: *Now, this is alright! One of these days -- and pretty soon, too -- they'll think they're too big to sit on my lap. It won't be long. Well, that'll be alright -- when it happens. . . .*

"Daddy. . .uh --?"

But quickly he interrupted, knowing what Kenneth Ray's question would be. "Well, boys, I'm going to see if I can get around here and stir us up some breakfast!"

"Daddy, when --?"

Again he broke into the question. "Why don't you fellows play a game of marbles? And I'll get busy around here. Stand up, boys. You need some socks and shoes on your feet. You don't need to be fanning around on this floor with bare feet."

Water from the teakettle steamed. Allen filled the washpan. The cast iron skillet was rinsed in hot water. Droplets popped as the moist skillet got hotter and hotter.

Down on the dirt floor, moving around the circle on their knees were the preoccupied boys, deciding which walnut "marbles" belonged in *this* pile and which ones belonged in *that* pile. They discounted the fact that all of their marbles looked the same -- just like walnuts. Kenneth Ray rubbed his right thumb knuckle -- still red and raw because he'd "shot" with a rough one the day before. He winced. But he didn't want to seem like a baby, and when Bennie yelled out, "This one's *mine!*" Kenneth Ray picked up one that looked like *his.* And a serious game of marbles was on!

While the walnuts were being knocked around, Allen cut a 16-inch sausage roll into eight two-inch pieces. Soon, thawed links seared and sizzled. From Lonzo's apple and potato bin, Allen took a few potatoes, washed them, and scraped off most of the peelings. He placed good-sized slices on one side of the skillet -- close to the sausage.

Yes, it smells good, he thought, *but I'm no cook. . . . and these potatoes -- they're wanting to stick to the bottom of this skillet. I guess I don't have enough sausage grease. Maybe I oughta put in a little water. No, I don't think that would help. . . .I'll. . .I'll just hold this skillet away from this hot stove. That's what Katie does when she's popping popcorn and it wants to burn. Well, we're all hungry, and this'll have to do it. . . .I guess it'll do. . . .and I'll just set this skillet right here -- right here on the coldest part of this stove and rinse off these two plates and these forks. . . .*

"That's about the best I can do," he said, quite pleased with the way he didn't burn the potatoes too badly. "Boys, you both need to wash your hands -- with some of this lye soap. I'm hungry!"

"*Me* too! *Me* too!" they said, jumping up from their shooting positions.

The threesome wasted no time. Allen thought, *Lord, I'm thankful I've got something to feed them.* Around the King heater they gathered, forking sausage links and chunks of half-cooked, sausage-seasoned, salted potatoes. Allen sat in the straight-back chair, eating from the skillet. Kenneth Ray and Bennie stood close to him. holding their plates and licking their lips.

As they ate, Allen was lost in his thoughts: *. . .Katie! She worked hard to get this sausage worked up. Katie knows how to season up sausage. She helped scrape out these entrails. . . .and soaked them in that salt water. And she was right there when we stuffed this sausage. Katie. . . ! Yeah, she's a good woman. . . .and a clean cook.*

too! His thoughts returned to Kenneth Ray and Bennie: *These little fellows have done really well -- so far -- and I --*

"Daddy, when are we. . . when --?" Kenneth asked.

Expecting a question he couldn't answer, Allen interrupted him. "Now, boys, when you finish up, you put your plates right over here. I've got water in the milk jar. You can drink that." They listened to him. Arguing with Daddy was out of the question. "And you let me clean out this stove and take care of Ole Beck and Kate. I'm glad the snow's letting up. And it's beginning to break day."

Inside the warm dugout, through the "fogged up" window glass, the boys watched as the hot bucket of coals was dumped close to the wagon wheel. Once again, they saw a cloud of steam rise from the ground as the hot waste hit the snow. They watched, but they didn't understand *why* Daddy was doing what he did.

But Allen had a plan! He worked it out as he worked! He untied the team and led them to the branch. While the mules drank, Allen's tracks crisscrossed in the snow. He'd walk. He'd kick tree limbs. He'd walk to another place and kick some more.

He stopped. He reached down, pulled a stout tree limb out of the snow, dragged it to the wagon, and left it in the snow -- close to the pile of cinders, ashes, and burned chunks. His buckle-up overshoes left more crisscrossed tracks in the snow -- tracks in front of the dugout, to the wagon, to the branch, to the dugout, to the wagon tongue, around the wagon, and then -- back to the dugout.

How he needed to experience the quietness of that small space! He looked for any comfort it could afford him. There on the table sat a half-full bucket of water. "That's a blessing!" he said. And there was the woodbox -- stacked high. And the heater was "paying off." And the teakettle steamed. "Yes, those are blessings!" he said. Shortly, Allen's jumper, cap, and gloves were hanging behind the stove, and his wet overshoes topped off the woodbox.

"Look, Daddy, it's not snowing now," Bennie said, and he was right. The snow *had* stopped. The skies were overcast. The air was still. Slowly, a doe and her fawn sauntered in front of the window. They darted away when Allen opened the door and tossed the potato peelings outside. In no time, the boot-tracked snow was covered with birds -- too many to count -- all of them scrambling for the peelings, and Bennie was yelling, "Birds are falling out of the sky!"

Pleased with the momentary diversion, Allen joined the boys at the window. Birds pecked feverishly. Tiny footprints imprinted the snow. Gradually, more and more birds gathered.

"Look here, boys!" Allen said. "Right here's a red bird, and these here. . .well. these are blackbirds. This blue one right here --a bluejay, and the brown ones are sparrows. And there are some blackbirds over there. And another red bird! All we need is a red-headed woodpecker. But I don't see a single woodpecker!" He chuckled. "But then you *don't* see a lot of woodpeckers pecking around down on the ground."

Seeing the redbird made him think of Katie. He remembered she had a little saying. He thought, *I can hear her now -- 'REDBIRD! REDBIRD! . . .KNOW YOU'RE TRUE! SOMEBODY'S COMIN'! . . .NOT EXPECTIN' THEM TO!' But I'd better not say anything about their mommie right now, no!*

Bennie hardly breathed as he watched those birds. They were a perfect distraction for him! And Kenneth Ray. . .well. . .Kenneth Ray was counting the number of bluejays and red birds and sparrows and black birds. He decided the sparrows were the winners because most of the birds were brown -- or close to brown in color.

"Yeah!" he said, sure of himself. "The sparrows won, but I can't count all of them. They jump around too much! Daddy, would you say there's a *hundred million* sparrows out there?"

The straight-back chair in front of the window became a parlor seat for both boys on Allen's lap, enabling them to see a nature show. For several minutes, birds congregated, pecking greedily and darting about. The doe and her fawn returned and drank from the branch. A squirrel took flight and landed on the roof of the dugout.

For a short while, Allen laid aside his work and worries. He escaped into the carefree world of his boys. Truly, he was captivated by the exuberant, playful critters on the other side of the steamed up glass. He thought about God and the birds and the deer and the squirrels -- and he had questions. Could it be that the birds and the deer sensed the pleasure human beings found in watching them? Could it be the birds heard but chose to ignore the boys' slight tappings on the window? Could it be these animals listened instinctively to God and came by the secluded dugout -- to teach a lesson to human beings?

The picture show couldn't last long, however. Allen had work to do, and only he could do it. Throughout the mid-morning hours, he furiously fed the stove and dumped refuse on the growing pile. Kenneth Ray and Bennie begged to go outside with him. *Well, at least this snow's stopped. It won't hurt them for just a little while -- right here outside the door,* he reasoned.

The closing of the door was loud. Unafraid, the mother deer and her young one stayed within a few feet of the three, two-legged spectators. However, the skittish birds flew up enmasse and hid themselves in a cedar tree. At first, they twittered, nonstop, with intensity. Then, gradually, their chirping stopped. And just as quickly as they'd flown up, down they swept in one swoop -- reds, blues, blacks, browns -- and rejoined the deer.

Frequently, Allen looked upward through the dense growth of trees, hoping to see a break in the clouds. The overcast sky, however, blocked any of the sun's light. Allen figured, though, that it was a little after dinner or maybe a little before two -- not too far up in the afternoon. He moved rapidly from one task to another and from one bucket to another, thinking about the oncoming nighttime, the lodged wheel, the steep incline, the children. . . .and he was weary.

He'd been awake for hours. He'd been working frantically since long before dawn. He wanted and *needed* to think about something else -- for a few minutes. Conceding, he said, "Alright now! We're gonna go in and warm up a bit."

Once again, jumpers, caps, and gloves found their places on the spike nails. Buckle-up overshoes again topped off the woodbox. Allen put more wood into the King heater, and as he did, he told the boys to get up on the bed and cover up and get warm.

"But, *Daddy*, when are we --?"

"Oh, my goodness, now! Let's all get warmed up and rest for a *little* while. Your poor ole daddy's all tuckered out. Let's just *rest*! Do you hear me?"

Within minutes, Kenneth Ray and Bennie were asleep on the bed. Shortly, Allen relaxed, stopped thinking, and *he* slept -- in the straight-back chair. On the outside, Mother Nature put on a continuous, magnificent performance, but no audience sat in front of the window.

At the same time, to the west and up the steep incline and on the main road -- the road leading past the hidden dugout -- four horsemen were galloping south. One of the riders reined in his horse. The others followed his cue.

Then the rider's voice boomed loudly: "Allen! Oh, Allen!" At once, he and the other horsemen heard the echoes --*Allen! Oh, Allen!*" -- drifting back to them from the hollows and hills in Christmas Tree Country Echoes were followed by silence. The man called again: "***Al-len!***" One echo. Silence.

Also, coming *up* the road from the south was a wagon pulled by a team of horses. Sitting on the wagon seat were a man and a woman. On the floor of the wagon bed sat three young people. The one girl looked to be about sixteen, and the other girl might've been thirteen. The boy was about eleven.

The four horsemen and the folks in the wagon met in the middle of the snow-covered road and talked, excitedly. Worried looks were on all of their faces. They shrugged their shoulders, shook their heads, and all of them started calling out loudly -- in unison -- "Allen! Allen! *Allen*! *Allen*! Al-l-l-en!" Echoes resounded.

The woman in the wagon slowly rose to her feet. She stood, rigidly. She motioned for everyone to hush. She waited. "*Sh-h-h-h!*" she insisted, in a raspy voice. "*Sh-h-h-h! Be still! Sh-h-h-h!* Turning to the ones who were seated behind her, she said, "Now, you children! You *hush up*!"

The children, the men, and the horses became quiet.

The silence was numbing. The woman looked out over the tranquil line of tall trees and cedars rising out of the deep valleys on each side of her. She strained her eyes, studying the dried up foliage and jagged stems and flat sprigs and sharp stobs shooting up through the fluffy, white stuff on top of them. It seemed as if they were saying, "*Look here*! *Look over here*!" Standing for several minutes, the woman said nothing. She turned slowly from side to side. She looked.

The woman was in command. Her audience -- the four in the wagon and the four on horseback -- didn't interrupt her. Imperatively, she exerted authority over them and the topmost branches of the trees and the flattest of places around her.

Then, at the moment of her choosing, in a hoarse voice she called out, "Allen! Allen!" Echoes. She swallowed hard and called again: "Allen! Allen! Oh, Allen!" Echoes. And "*Allen! Allen! Allen!*" was followed by echo, echo, echo. She lifted herself to full height. In a voice more raspy and hoarse, she called again: "Al - *len!* ***Oh! Al-len! AL - L - L - EN!"*** The rolling hills and valleys answered: "*Al - len! Oh! Al-len! AL - L - L - EN!*" Then there was no sound.

In anguish, the woman -- without a voice -- whispered: "Allen! Oh! Al-len!" The trees and valleys were silent. The whisper-echoes were inaudible.

The man on the wagon seat looked up at her and tugged on the skirt of her long dress. She pulled her head scarf over the top of her head and tied it tightly under her chin. Once more, he tugged on her skirt. This time, she didn't ignore him. She

turned, briefly, and looked at the three young ones. She, then, willingly sat down beside him on the wagon seat. Her shoulders fell. Looking straight ahead, she nodded. That was her signal to the man. He spoke to the team. The wagon went north.

The four horsemen watched them they as rode away. They gazed at one another. After one last look at the moving wagon, they turned to face the opposite direction. The horses galloped south.

Also, coming *up* the road from the south, a quarter-of-a mile-or-so behind the man, the woman, and the children in the wagon was another man -- a man riding a mule. Upon meeting, the four men on the horses and the one man on the mule stopped. *They* talked. With his thumb, the man on the mule pointed down the road -- to the south. With his index finger, he pointed up the road -- to the north.

Then, the man on the mule went north. The men on the horses went south.

~ ~ ~

Inside the warm, quiet dugout, the three were pacified. The boys didn't stir. And Allen, sitting upright and close to the warm stove, dreamed.

In a sound sleep, he could see himself as a boy -- just big enough to hang onto the handles of a plow. He was back at the home where he'd been born and raised, The Old Home Place. He was out in a big, open field. As clear as day, he saw himself behind a horse and plow! He could even feel dry, hard, dirt clods torturing his bare feet.

And -- in his dream -- he recognized a voice. Over and over, he could hear his mother calling out: ***"Al - len! Al - len! Oh, Al - len! Al -len! Al - len!"***

The heat of the sun was beating against his shirtless, sunburned arms and bare neck. He felt the sting of his blistered shoulders under his loose overall straps. The only thing he had between him and the blazing sun was his brother John's well-worn straw hat.

Plainly -- in his dream -- he could see himself out there under that hot sun during the late afternoon -- struggling and thirsty -- facing the long, long corn row yet to be plowed. He figured the sun had'd been up in the sky all day, and *he was hot*. . . .

. . .and his upper left arm was *hot*, for sure! Oh, yes! In his sleep, Allen'd leaned over against Lonzo's King heater and burned a hole in the sleeve of his heavy flannel shirt and right on through the sleeve of his long-handled underwear!

Feeling the pain, he jerked. "Well!" he said, jumping to his feet. He rubbed his arm briskly. Flakes and pieces of scorched, stiff flannel and cotton fell on the dirt floor. "Man!" he exclaimed, touching raw skin. "*I almost caught myself on fire!* I must've just *dozed off in this chair*! *And I. . .I must've rubbed up against this hot stove!* I *had* to be *asleep*! *And dreaming!* But it was like *real*. I heard Mommie call me just the way she'd do when I'd be working out in the fields -- when I was a boy back home. Well! It all seemed so *real!* I could *swear* Mommie was calling me! That's *strange*! And, yeah, I guess I just got too close to that hot stove! *Lands! Phew!*"

He looked quickly at the boys. They slept on, but he didn't have time to sit in that chair! After pulling on his overshoes and putting two pieces of wood into the stove, he glanced at the boys again. He sighed. Worry and self-doubts crept into his mind.

Aw, now! he said to himself. *When there's a job to be done, just get at it and done! I hope I can get this one done! Well, now, I'm going to see about this.*

Out of the dugout and to the rear of the wagon, he hurried. First, using Lonzo's shovel -- the one with the *best* handle -- he began. He first threw burned chunks and cinders and ashes into the space in front of the rock. He then packed cinders and ashes under the part of bed which rested against the rock. He laid down a narrow path of cinders and ashes, beginning at the front wheel and continuing *under* the part of the bed his shovel could reach. He was thankful for the wet ashes; they packed down better, he figured. Next, he pushed a fair-sized branch rock close to the side of the leaning wagon. Lastly, he wedged the long, stout tree limb a good three feet under the wagon bed. After a couple of tries, he was able to maneuver the free end of the limb up to the top of the rock, and he told the Lord he was thankful to have a rock like that -- one with a *wide, almost flat* surface. And he hoped he could -- when the time was right -- push down on that limb and. . . .

. . .from that moment on, Allen believed he *might be able* to do what he knew he *had to do.* "There!" he said, quite surprised. "Thank You for all of Your help, Lord!"

With some reservations, he looked at Ole Beck and Kate who were tied to the post. He spoke his thoughts. "Yeah. . .well, I hope so! These two mules have their work cut out for them, too!" The one-way conversation between himself and himself continued as he walked toward the dugout. "And I'd say it's about three o'clock by this time -- or maybe four. Yeah, I'd say its pretty close to four o'clock!"

Yes, the late afternoon hours were fast approaching. Darkness was imminent. He thought about how he'd have to put more coal oil into the lantern. "That's right. Yeah," he said aloud. He was planning what he would and wouldn't have to do -- IF everything went the right way. "Maybe I won't have to add any wood to that stove."

Wasting no time, he hurried to wake Kenneth Ray and Bennie, but he found them with their jumpers, caps, gloves, and boots on and standing in front of the window -- watching the birds and the doe and her fawn. "Well, you're already ready! That'll save us a few minutes!" he said with relief in his voice.

Once inside, he drank from the water bucket, held his ungloved hands over the heater, and cleared his throat. "Listen, children, I need to tell you what we --"

But, ***suddenly***, **there came *a crash, a thud, and a swish!***

No, Allen was *not* dreaming! Cornerwise to the left of the dugout, a tree collapsed. On its way to the ground, its branches struck the branches of other trees, causing a limb storm! Even the ground shook when the tree's trunk hit it. The dugout trembled, too, when limbs crashed down on its overhang.

The scene was chaotic! Clouds of birds fluttered about -- confused and chatttering. Some hopped up and down. Some flew sideways. Some struck others and landed on the ground. And the deer simply vanished.

Inside the dugout, the situation was just as bad! Kenneth Ray and Bennie -- the in-front-of-the-window eyewitnesses to the pandemonium -- were frightened and shaking. And Allen, shook up, too, was feeling soul-sick. He was thinking: *What else is going to happen?*

He was fully expecting to see that window glass break all to pieces!. "Get away! Move back, boys!" he yelled. "That glass'll hit you in the face!" For *some* reason, however -- and much in his favor -- the glass *didn't* shatter.

His heart beat fast, but Allen wasn't fainthearted. Even though Mother Nature had dumped snow on Christmas Tree Country and may have been the cause of the tree's breakdown, *he* refused to cave in. That attitude was a blessing because Lonzo's front yard was one discouraging sight! Tree limbs, broken branches, birds' nests, a hornet's nest, and bark lay all around -- in the snow. Although the door was partially blocked, it opened inward, allowing Allen access to the outside. He figured he'd find a way to clear that doorway.

Alright! Alright! he thought. *These children are not hurt! I'm not hurt! But what about the mules? Oh, Lord! My dear Lord!*

Uneasy, but with calmness, he took control of the scene. "Stand back out of the way, boys," he said, moving them away from the door. "You'll have to let me open this door and shove these limbs out into the yard. Stay here -- inside."

A large, forked, elm tree limb lay against the door. He managed to break off branches, crawl over the sprawling tree trunk, and pull the door shut. *Well, now, we can get in and out and close this door,* he thought.

Next, he looked for Ole Beck and Kate. They were gone! They weren't standing there -- at the corner of the dugout -- tied to the post. And the post was *gone!* The left corner of the porch -- once propped up by the timber -- sagged under the limb's heavy weight.

"Oh, Lord!" he said loudly.

Maneuvering through the rubble, he walked rapidly to an open area in front of the dugout. He whistled for the team. He listened. He whistled again. One mule snorted. *That sounds like Ole Beck!* he thought. As he stumbled toward the sounds -- over limbs and branches and through brush -- he breathed fast and his heart thumped. But his whistling was loud! And the snorting was loud! And he *knew* that was Ole Beck! He'd heard her snort *many* times.

Around to the side of the dugout he made his way, hoping to see them. He whistled once more. Ole Beck answered! She *knew* that was Allen! She'd listened to his whistling *many* times! She snorted again. This time, he *saw* them! There across the branch and up close to the bluff she and Kate stood -- *alive* -- and still tied to the dangling post!

Heavily, he sighed and caught his breath. The first words out of his mouth were: "Whew! *Thank the good Lord!*"

Inside, the boys waited by the window, preoccupied with all of the pecking and jumping of the birds. The crashing of the tree turned into something good for those *birds* -- a new store of food. Worms, bugs, and other insects were theirs for the taking.

"Look, Kenneth Ray! Look right down there! Right there! Do you see that bird under that limb?" Bennie said, tapping on the glass and pointing to the bird lying on the ground.

Standing on his tiptoes, Kenneth Ray searched for *the* bird. "Where?"

"Right there!"

"*Where?* Oh! Yeah! Yeah! I see it *now*!" Kenneth Ray answered. "It can't get out from under that big tree. That tree "mallerd" that poor little bird's head. That tree just up and fell on it!"

As the boys looked at the bird -- helplessly flapping its one wing -- they felt pity for it. The bird wanted to fly away. They knew that. It would stay there and die, probably. They knew that, too.

Allen looked toward the window. He saw the boys. He looked toward the bluff. He saw the mules, too. His mind was racing. *Dear Lord!* he thought.

With so many things to take care of, his mind was in a turmoil. He'd just have to *trust* that for a few minutes Kenneth Ray and Bennie'd be safe. He'd *have to catch those mules!* He thought about the damage to the roof of the dugout and wondered if a limb'd knocked off the stovepipe and. . . .

Yes, Allen had several things to think about. He was sure that, shortly, the boys'd be asking about going to Granny's house. And he knew they'd be thinking about Mommie and Geraldine and supper time and wanting to be at home. One thing he didn't know about was the helpless bird!

First, he had to "see about" the mules. In a run, he crossed the branch and made his way through the trees and brush. Both mules were snorting, explaining their earthly trials. Kate hushed, but Beck, the spokesmule stayed with it: ***Howdy, Allen! Howdy!*** *We were just standing there --* ***just standing there, mind you*** -- as *big as you please -- and all of a sudden, we heard this loud ka-**boom!** -- you know? -- like a wagon load of walnuts being dumped on top of the chickenhouse and some dadgum, stubborn mules kicking the sides of the barn all at the same time -- you know? -- and then -- ka-**wham!** We got whopped on the head with heavy stuff -- and we had to get out of there or be killed! But we didn't run off too far, did we, Allen?* He smiled weakly. Beck took a break. Kate glanced at Beck and snorted, softly.

Within a few minutes, around the corner of the dugout Allen walked, leading the dazed team of mules. He freed them from the dangling post, and a sturdy walnut tree by the trapped wagon wheel became their second hitching post. Hurriedly, he made a path through the debris and headed for the dugout.

Peering up through the scraggy limbs, Allen looked for the black stovepipe. A big smile crossed his face! Was he not the happiest stranded man with two boys in Christmas Tree Country when he saw that piece of tin in one piece? There it was -- standing strong -- with a thin wisp of smoke escaping from its mouth! He yelled out, "It's a *thousand wonders*! Yeah, it's a *thousand wonders that flimsy stovepipe didn't got knocked off! But it's still up there! Man! Oh, man! Thank the Lord!"*

Kenneth Ray and Bennie hadn't left their places in front of the window. They were monitoring the bird. Allen -- needing to "thaw out" a bit and needing a drink of water and hoping to get his second wind -- increased the number of onlookers to three.

"Daddy?" Bennie asked. "Daddy, do you see that little bird under that limb?"

"*Which* limb, Son?"

"Right down there. Right there on the ground," he answered, pointing, and tapping the window pane. "Right down there, Daddy."

"Son, don't *tap* the window glass. It might just fall out! Where? Oh, yeah, I do see it *now*. And it's trapped, for sure."

Bennie, with sad-looking eyes, was ready to cry. He tried to hide his tears. Misty eyes were turned away.

"Yes," Allen said, "but, *right now*, Son, this stove needs two pieces of wood -- not very much -- for now. And you boys. . .you stay here. It's dangerous outside. A limb could fall on *you*, and now that *would be bad.* Yes, *that would be bad!* Just wait here."

Using both hands, Allen lifted the branch off the small-for-December sparrow, hoping it find the strength to fly away. It didn't.

"Well!" Allen said, turning his attention back toward the window.

The boys, especially Bennie, looked forlorn *and* happy -- at the same time. Then, with his gloved hand, Allen gently picked up the bird and carried it toward the door. Bennie, elated, opened the door for Daddy, happy in being a part of the rescue.

"Now, Son, this sparrow's just got a broken wing -- maybe. I don't know if it'll make it. We'll try to "feed it up" and doctor it, but, children," he paused, "it might not *make it*. Just get ready -- if it dies. That's the way it is -- sometimes." Bennie, soberly, took in all of his words. Allen quickly added, "Now, boys, we oughta look around here and find some kind of an old box -- just some kind of a *little* box -- to keep it in. And we oughta see if we can find some kind of an old rag for the box."

As if by *magic*, a box with a lid was found! And -- somehow or other -- a soft rag "fell into the box" and cushioned the bottom, making a perfect bird bed! Allen gave instructions. "Alright! *Now*, boys, let's put this bird in that box. Don't touch him too much, Bennie. Just keep an eye on him. And don't breathe right over him. Be easy. Put that box over here close to the stove. Don't jiggle him around too much. Let him rest up. We'll figure out what to feed him and how to get some water down him -- in a little bit here. Look at him, but don't touch him right now. Kenneth Ray, well. . .Son, you just help Bennie *watch* the bird."

Leaving the boys with the sparrow, he shoveled, carried, and dumped what he hoped would be the *final* bucket. As he worked, he made a decision: "I've *got* to tell them, and now's the time to do it and get it over with and done!"

With his heart racing, he opened the door. He began: "Say, now, boys! I'm going to need your help. You get your coats on, so you'll stay good and warm. Here, Bennie, Son, let me help you buckle up these overshoes. Kenneth Ray, hand me his gloves. *Alright!* We'll go outside. Now, boys, we're going to pull together, and Ole Beck and Kate are going to pull this wagon out of here!"

He led the boys in front of the mules and to the right side of the wagon. He lifted Kenneth Ray up to the wagon seat. "Now, Son," he said, "you sit as much in the middle as you can. I know the wagon seat tips over to this side, but you just stay *in the middle* -- if you can. Hold these lines a little bit loose. Now, you be listening, Son! When I yell out, 'Whoa, Beck,' you pull back on these lines. Hold them with both hands. Pull back as *hard as you can.* Hear? When I say, 'Whoa, Beck,' you do that. Pull *hard!*"

"Yes, Daddy!"

Turning to Bennie, he said, "Now, Son, you come on over here to this *other* side, and -- and I'd say you oughta take that bird back inside. . . ."

Well, yes, Bennie *had* forgotten to leave the bird by the warm stove! But, as fast as his short legs would carry him, he found his way through the branches and was back at the dugout and pushing against the heavy door and leaving the bird inside and was, once

again, standing close to Daddy and breathing *hard* -- ready to pay close attention, *close attention!*

Looking directly at Bennie, knowing he'd be doing a man's job, Allen said, "Son, here's a limb that's not too heavy. It's long but not too heavy. You take this limb, and when I holler out, 'Bennie! Bennie! Bennie!' -- you hit that mule with this limb. Hit her just "tobble" hard. Bennie, are you listening to me, Son? Now, you'll have to hit her. . . .well, "tobble" hard, and she oughta take right off and pull hard. You stand back," he said, showing him the right place. "Stand right *here*. *Right here!* Are you listening, Bennie?"

Bennie, without batting an eye, stared up at him. This time, *Bennie was listening!*

"Now, Son, don't you get *too* close! You don't want to get right behind her hind legs. She might kick. You jump out of the way -- if you have to! Jump over *this way* if she starts to kick. Now!" Allen took a breath. "Now, when you hear me yell out, 'Stop! Stop! Stop!' -- you can stop *right then.* Don't hit her another lick. Hear?"

"Yes, Daddy!"

Proudly, Kenneth Ray, only six years old, sat in the middle of the tipped-over-t'other-side wagon seat. He *did realize* Daddy'd *never before* let him hold the lines. Daddy'd told him to keep the lines loose. That meant he'd just let them dangle and flop around and let them swing back and forth. Then, when he'd hear Daddy yell, "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" -- he'd pull back on the lines and pull *hard* and stay right where he was -- in the middle of that wagon seat. He *wanted* to do everything just right -- ***for Daddy!***

And there Bennie was -- feeling all grown-up and standing on the left side of the wagon -- leaving small boot tracks in the snow. He *didn't realize* he was only four years old! No, he felt like a big boy! And he wanted to use his big muscles and raise that limb up high -- yes, *high!* -- and hit that mule with his limb when he'd hear Daddy holler, "Bennie! Bennie! Bennie!" He'd hit that mule -- just right. He'd keep his eyes all-the-way open, and he'd stand where Daddy'd told him to stand, and he'd watch out for that mule's hind legs, and when Daddy'd say, "Stop! Stop! Stop!" -- he'd not hit *another lick*! He didn't want to forget -- the way he did a little while ago with the bird! No, *this time* he *hoped* he'd do everything just right -- ***for Daddy!***

"Now, boys, let's get ready," Allen said, hoping he'd keep *his* end of the bargain and that things'd go the *right* way. Using all of *his* strength, he pushed down on the limb. The wagon bed creaked. The wagon wheel inched upward. Again, he pushed down -- hard! Again, the wagon bed creaked. That wheel moved higher. He pushed even harder and harder, forcing that wagon bed to come up off that ground.

When the time was right, Allen yelled, "Bennie! Bennie! **Ben**-nie!"

Bennie raised *his* limb and hit and hit and hit! He hit harder and *harder!* Then, he heard: "Stop! Stop! **Stop**!" -- and he held that big limb in mid-air.

Seconds later, Kenneth Ray heard: "Whoa! Whoa! **Whoa**! Wh-o-oa Beck! Wh-o-o-oa, Kate!" Kenneth Ray drew back on the lines. He gritted his teeth, made his meanest face, and straightened out those lines. And he kept them *tight!* When the team

halted, he was *behind* the wagon seat, holding on for dear life, and he was still tugging -- and the lines weren't flopping around.

When the four wheels did stop rolling, the team and the wagon were a good distance from the branch rock where the wheel had been trapped. And in the wet cinders and ashes was the *track* of the liberated wagon wheel!

And close to the branch rock lay a slightly cracked tree limb!

"*Whew - **ee!***" Allen said, excitedly. "I'm proud of you, *boys! Proud of you, for sure!* And, Kenneth Ray, you can stop pulling now, Son! *Yes! I'm proud of you, boys!*"

"Daddy -- are -- are you -- are you proud -- proud of Ole Beck and Kate?" Bennie asked, walking toward him and holding his tree limb up in the air.

Overjoyed, Kenneth Ray jumped down from the wagon and said, "Daddy, I'm like Mommie! *I'm proud of the **Lord**!*"

Relieved -- *and thankful to the Lord* -- Allen reached down to put his arms around their shoulders. He drew them close to him. The three'd made a memory they'd talk about for years to come. Allen had a happiness in his heart beyond words. Tears came to his eyes.

"Bennie," he chuckled, "you can go ahead and put that limb down now, Son! Yeah, and we'd better tie up these mules so they won't try to run off again. Another tree limb might just fall and scare them. We'll grab some of this straw. I'd say there's not more than a couple of bites left." Allen looked to the west. "Let's get ready to pull out of here, children! We'll get things straightened up for Lonzo and check that stove again. He left out one detail: *If that bird's still alive, we need to do something about it, too.*

Strutting, Kenneth Ray and Bennie headed for the dugout, leading the way and jumping over limbs and branches. They felt like men who'd done a "daddy" job -- *hard work!* This time, Daddy followed *them.*

Dusk settled in as the dugout was "put back in shape" for Lonzo. Kenneth Ray and Bennie carried in wood and kindling and kept an eye on the bird. Allen emptied the last of the stove's ashes. He cleaned up the skillet and two plates and what they'd "messed up."

Frozen hog meat was carried from the wagon, packed inside Lonzo's water bucket, and covered with a cloth. On top of the cloth, Allen placed a few heavy rocks. *Maybe,* he thought, *these rocks'll keep a mouse from gnawing on this meat. I'll just put this water bucket right here on this table. Lonzo'll know somebody's been here.*

The fire'd died down. No wood revived it. The time'd come for the dugout's visitors to leave.

Kenneth Ray asked, "Daddy, I. . .can I take some of Lonzo's walnuts? Mommie's been wanting some of Lonzo's walnuts for the divinity candy for Christmas, Daddy."

"And can I take some apples?" Bennie wanted to know.

"It's alright, boys. Just leave some for Lonzo." *I'd say the little fellows are getting hungry,* he said to himself, *but I won't mention that now.*

With the toe of his overshoe, Allen smoothed out the circle in the dirt floor. The boys followed his example and did their part in leaving Lonzo's floor as they'd found it. Proudly, Allen looked at them and rubbed the tops of their heads with his gloved hands.

After giving the dugout a once-over, he told them, "Well, the damper's shut off, and the fire's all but died out. Here, children! We'll take this old quilt. It's good and dry. Lonzo won't care. He won't run short until we can give it back to him. Anyway, I'll have to come by and put that post back for him, when I can find the time. . . .and I'll try to help him patch up that overhang, too."

"One thing we oughta do *now*, boys, is find us an old rag. We'll try to wet it and get some water down this bird. Bennie, I think there's some water in that quart jar, Son. You'll need to hurry up. . . ."

"Daddy," he said, "you know all about a hurt bird, don't you?"

"Well, Bennie, I. . .I'm going to wrap up this bird in this cloth. That'll keep him warm and keep him from flopping around and hurting himself. We'll try to get a swallow or two down him. And can one of you find a piece of that sausage we had for breakfast? And I need two matchsticks. Kenneth Ray, hurry up and hand me the pocketknife, Son."

With the blade of the Barlow knife, Allen trimmed two matchsticks, each one to a fine point, and made what Christmas Tree Country folks would've called *toothpicks*. Kenneth Ray, beaming with pride, took the knife from Daddy's hand and put it back into the bib of *his* overall pocket.

"Now, boys, we've got to hurry! Bennie, dip this rag into that water. Get the end of it good and wet and give it to me." With the bird wrapped in the cloth -- with only its head showing -- Allen was ready to try to get *another* unexpected job done!

With his thumbnail, he gently opened the bird's beak. That left a space for him to place the toothpick -- from side to side -- across its beak. His plan was working! Holding the bird with its neck outstretched, he squeezed the wet cloth. The drops of water slid past the toothpick and disappeared.

Wide-eyed and with his mouth open, Bennie looked on. Probably, the bird was wide-eyed, too, and its mouth was *definitely* open!

Not in the least surprised, Kenneth Ray knew what Daddy was attempting to do. He'd seen Mommie pry open the beak of a gosling -- *an orphan gosling*. He remembered he'd found that gosling all hatched out -- barely big enough to have soft fuzz -- and it was all by itself out in the back yard on the cold ground and so weak it couldn't stand up.

That gosling became *Kenneth Ray's gosling*. And his gosling would've died if Mommie wouldn't have kept it in a cardboard box behind the kitchen stove. And at bedtime, when she didn't have a fire going in the kitchen stove, she'd throw an old rag over the box -- so his gosling wouldn't get chilled. And Mommie'd make his gosling drink water, and she'd smash up egg yolks and make it eat. And after it got some stronger, it'd dip its beak into the water Mommie'd put into a little lid, and it'd peck around on the bottom of its box and eat mash and cornmeal and get up on its two feet -- and fall over. And before too long, his gosling could stand up -- and *not* fall over.

And Kenneth Ray *really* took care of his gosling then! Mommie'd even let him hold it! And it learned how to waddle around in its box. And one day, it learned how to get *out* of its box. And he had to put it back inside the box. And it hopped out again! And sometimes it'd hop out of its box and just "up and *poop*" -- right there on the kitchen floor! And, pretty soon, it didn't want any more of that staying in that box. . . .

. . .and then, Mommie *had* to put it out in the chickenhouse with her chickens and the hens. Oh, yes, he remembered *his gosling!*

"Daddy," Kenneth Ray said. "Here's some of that sausage -- two bites -- in *itty-bitty* pieces and all smashed up, too."

"Fine! Now, boys, let's try to get this done! Here, Kenneth Ray, push this toothpick into that piece *right here*. *That's right!* When I tell you to, put it up to his beak. Try to get some to go down. But don't punch, though. Be easy!"

Two bird-sized sausage bites were successfully maneuvered. The boys were "feeling proud," and Allen was thinking, *It isn't every day a person's got to feed a sparrow! I'm pretty sure Katie read over it in the Bible that the Lord knows when every little sparrow falls out of the sky. Yeah, I remember she did.*

Satisfied, the full-bellied bird was back in the box and under Bennie's arm as Allen closed the door to the dugout. On their way to the wagon, Bennie played it safe, hoping he wouldn't fall down over a limb and drop the box. But Kenneth Ray threw caution to the wind and straddled the branches, and when he could, he took long strides -- like Daddy.

With haste, Allen lifted Bennie and the bird up and onto the wagon seat. Kenneth Ray was big enough to get up on that wagon seat *without* any help! He'd grown up a whole lot in the past hour! Allen joined them on the wagon seat.

Bennie, clutching the bird box, moved closer to Daddy. Kenneth Ray, holding the quilt, scooted closer to Bennie. Before signaling the team, Allen said, "Children, I *think* you oughta jump down off this wagon seat and get down on the floor and cover up with Lonzo's quilt -- just for a little while." What he didn't tell them was: *When we go up that steep hill, we're bound to run into some problems. Some limbs or maybe whole trees might be down. It'll be a bumpy ride. And there's all of this snow on this lane. I just hope I can see well enough to straddle that gully up there! Phew! You're going to bounce around a lot, and I don't want to see you get thrown off this wagon seat!*

After everyone was in place, Ole Beck and Kate began the first leg of Lonzo's lane. As Allen had thought, they had to pull the wagon over and around several limbs. They were punched in their faces by snow-covered branches. The limbs and punches were minor upsets. And being mules, they didn't know this stretch of Lonzo's lane was a cakewalk, the easy part. The *hard part* lay ahead of them, and Allen *knew* that.

Several minutes passed. He was in deep thought. He hoped for the best. He imagined the worst. He was uneasy, knowing they were heading up that treacherous slope -- with not very much daylight left.

"Whoa, Beck!" he said. He sat there briefly. *This is going to be a rough ride for all of us,* he thought, *and when we do get started, there can't be any stopping or turning around. We've got to make it to the top!* Over his shoulder, he said, "Boys! Boys, you might just bounce around back there. Maybe you oughta get up here as close to this wagon seat as you can. Put your heads up under it and get down on your bellies and stay covered up with that quilt. You keep that quilt over your heads -- if you can."

"We will, Daddy," Kenneth Ray said in a muffled voice -- from under the quilt.

Tinges of fear crept into the boys' minds as they lay face down on the hard, splintery floor of the wagon bed -- with no straw to cushion them. They lay quietly.

wondering -- wondering if they'd bounce up and bang their heads on that wagon seat *or* if they'd just bounce up and fly right out of that wagon.

Speaking from his experience of being nineteen days shy of being two years older than Bennie, Kenneth Ray assumed the big brother role. "I think, Bennie," he said, "that Daddy's pretty sure we'll be bumping up and down when we go up this hill. You might oughta put that bird between us. I'll help you *hold him down*." And after Kenneth Ray'd spent some more time under Lonzo's quilt, he added, "Bennie, I. . .I. . .I bet you Daddy'd make *Mommie* and *Geraldine* hunker up under this quilt, too -- if they'd be here with us."

"Yeah. . ." Bennie whispered.

"Mommie'd keep us all covered up."

"Yeah. . ."

"And I'm thirsty," Kenneth Ray said.

"Yeah. . ."

"Are *you* hungry, too?"

"Yeah. . ."

"Bennie, I wish Mommie and Geraldine'd be here under this quilt with us."

"*Me too!*"

"Well, I'll help you *hold down this bird*!"

And Allen, sitting on the wagon seat, took a deep breath. He squared his shoulders and briskly slapped with the lines. The work began! His work began! *Their* work began! Tree limbs, weighted down with snow, ripped into the ears, heads, backs, and sides of the mules. As the wagon wheels sank in deep holes and rolled over large rocks, both mules labored against the pitching of the wagon bed.

More than once, limbs struck him in the face, but he dismissed the scratches and stings. Sometimes, he was sitting on the edge of the wagon seat. At other times, he was standing on his feet, swaying. Continuously and sternly, he talked to them: "Giddyup, Beck! Giddyup, Kate! ***Haw! Haw***! Giddyup, Beck! ***Gee! Gee!***"

We've got to keep moving! he kept saying to himself. *We can't stop! We've got to keep moving!*

The team struggled -- harder and harder! Allen struggled with them! He poured every ounce of the sausage-and-potato breakfast he had in him into making a team of three!

By slapping with the lines, he kept them from stalling. He believed if they ever did stop. . .well, that'd be it! He couldn't let that happen! Over and over, he'd say to himself: *Sometimes you go so far you can't afford to turn back. We've gone too far to turn back now!*

Being bonded, Ole Beck and Kate compliantly applied their youthful strength, straining every muscle in their bodies, *but they kept those wagon wheels moving forward!* Beck didn't even bother to complain! And what about Kate? Well, Kate was just Kate -- good ole steady Kate -- with the muscle. Beck and Kate -- together! They were one of the best teams in Christmas Tree Country, and they wanted to be -- ***for Allen!***

After what was a *long*, uphill haul, the mules came to an almost insuperable hurdle -- a roadbed of debris covered with snow. They weren't fazed, even though they'd *never* been forced to climb on and drag that wagon bed over an accumulation of

downed tree limbs and branches. The bottom boards of the bed scrubbed across uneven, jagged heaps which threatened -- every second -- to forbid forward motion. Those mules felt the resistance and pulled vigorously. And behind them came that wagon bed on its four wheels, much like a spider on legs. And because *both* Ole Beck and Kate were determined, not one time did they allow that wagon bed to hang up.

Finally, close to exhaustion -- and close to the finish -- they faced the snow-covered, low-hanging canopylike mass. Allen forcefully encouraged them to *move on!* Without questioning him, they pulled the wagon wheels into the narrow, nature-made archway. And somehow -- *somehow*! -- they plowed themselves and that wagon into and through the clutching fingers of their last obstacle.

What redemption! After strenuous labor, and with nothing jabbing them in their faces, and with no branches digging into their sides, and with no clumps of snow falling down into their eyes and on their necks and back, they were *free!* Champions of the hill! They'd done it! They'd reached the place where Lonzo's lane met the main road!

Allen called out, *"Gee! **Gee!**"* The mules turned right on the main road -- to go north -- and they halted when Allen called out, *"Whoa! Whoa,* Beck! Whoa, Kate!" They *gladly* halted! They snorted! They flopped their ears!

Relieved, Allen breathed rapidly. He stood up in the wagon, took off his cap, slapped it against the sideboards, and tried to see what was behind him -- wanting first to see Kenneth Ray and Bennie. On the wagon seat and in the wagon bed were the spoils of their difficult trip up that hill -- snow, limbs, leaves, and an abundance of cedar tree needles.

Concerned, Allen uncovered the boys. He could tell they were moving around! "Well, now, children, I'd say the worst of it's *over!* And I'd say Lonzo's quilt saved you, for sure." In the bib of his overall pocket, he found some dry matches and lit the lantern. "Well!" he said, unable to fully believe they were on the other side of that steep hill and out on the main road. "We had a pretty rough ride, didn't we, boys? And that gully! *Well. . .!* Yeah, there's snow *all over* this wagon, and there's a good-sized tree limb -- maybe more than one -- on top of this hog meat! But, I see *you're. . . .you're both alright!* We can thank the Lord for that! I'd better take a look at Ole Beck and Kate, and I'd better see if this wagon's still in one piece. We went over some *bad stuff*! Kenneth Ray, hop up here, Son, and hold these lines."

After two trips around the team and holding that lantern close to the wheels -- so he could get a *good* look -- he climbed back into the wagon, blew out the lantern, took the lines from Kenneth Ray's hands, and was once again on the wagon seat. With a lilt in his voice, he said, "Alright, now, Ole Beck and Kate! Let's make tracks for The Fox Dan Webb Place!"

In response, the mules snorted. Beck picked up where she'd left off with her bellyaching: *Well, it's about time! Yeah, it's about time! Now this is more like it! Huuh! I've had enough of that steep hill and deep holes and climbing over big rocks and getting clobbered on the head! I'm ready to see easier times -- like pulling this wagon out here on this good road or plowing up Katie's garden. I don't know about you, Kate, but I can't take another minute of this goofy stuff we've had to put up with! Huuh!*

Then Kate -- with rattled nerves and a "tad bit "out of sorts -- put in her two snorts' worth: *Allen, we don't mean to be persnickety mules, but there's just so much two mules can stand!*

And, as Beck and Kate might've expected, Allen didn't understand a snort of a word coming out of their mouths. However, they *did understand* what came out of *his* mouth: "Giddap, Beck! Giddap, Kate!"

Kenneth Ray heard him talking to the mules and asked, "Daddy. . .uh. . .we're not going down to Granny's --?"

"No, not right now, Son. We're going *home -- straight home!"*

And when Bennie overheard what Daddy'd said, he spoke up, authoritatively, "Daddy! Daddy, we're going *home!* Yeah! We're going *straight home* -- right now! Yeah! *Giddap*, Beck. . . and. . .and you. . .*you giddap, too, Kate!"*

Soon he and the bird and Kenneth Ray were again under the quilt -- bumping up and down and riding along in the darkness of the night -- just waiting. . . .

With the hard part being over, Allen talked to himself and let his mules move on up the snow-covered road. *I've not ever been gone from home this long,* he thought. *I'll never understand why some of these people want to be gone away from home all of the time. I like to sleep in my own bed and have Katie and the children close to me. I don't know how I'll find things. . . . I don't know how Katie's managed. I'd say it's been hard on her. Well, I'll just get things -- we'll just get things done -- somehow. . . .*

Turning around, he spoke to the boys. "How are you back there? Bennie, how's the bird? And, Kenneth Ray, you're awfully quiet, Son."

Actually, Kenneth Ray was saying nothing because he was *thinking.* Thinking? That's right! All of the pulling on the lines, and all of the being such a big man-child back there by the branch, and all of that making those mules whoa, and all of the bouncing along on the road, and all of the time away from Mommie and Geraldine and The Fox Dan Webb Place -- yes, all of it put together -- had brought on a fast growth spurt for Kenneth Ray. He no longer felt like a *boy*! His six years of being in Christmas Tree Country were behind him!

And there under the security of Lonzo's quilt and with his fingers in the bib of his overall pocket -- wrapped around Daddy's Barlow pocketknife -- he was feeling about ten feet tall! Why, he'd clutched that pocketknife so long it was almost *hot!* He was proud because he was big enough to take care of something so valuable! A young child he was at six years old, talking to himself: *This is Daddy's knife. . . .Daddy's Barlow pocketknife. . .a good knife! Daddy's a big man! I'm going to be big someday -- like Daddy!* Why, Kenneth Ray was ready to tackle the whole wide world -- *maybe!*

But Bennie, more concerned with his growling stomach answered, "I'm eating one of Lonzo's apples, Daddy. I'm hungry!" And, no, he hadn't forgotten the bird. Bennie'd just been *busy*! Right then and there, he laid his apple aside.

To Bennie, the box didn't look too crumpled up. With Kenneth Ray's help, he'd managed to keep it in the wagon. He'd done his best to keep it dry. Carefully, he lifted the box lid and peeked inside. "He's still in there, Daddy, but I can't see him very well under this quilt. Daddy, do *you* want an apple?"

Apples were passed to Daddy. Apple cores were tossed over the sides of the wagon. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and eight landed in the snow. "Just how

many apples do you boys have left?" he wanted to know. It was then Daddy decided he wasn't hungry after all. "You children -- you go ahead and eat those two apples."

Yes, there were two left. Kenneth Ray held his apple. Bennie held his apple. With their appetites somewhat suppressed, and not really hungry for *apples*, they became quiet.

Allen chuckled as he talked to himself. *Here we are -- going up this road -- with this bird -- with all of this hog meat -- and without the Christmas tree I promised the children and Katie. We've been out on a "wild goose chase" all of this time.*

Time passed. . . .

. . .and the mules clipity clopped. . . and clipity clopped. . .and clipity clopped. . . !

The brightness of the snow illuminated the road. Unsure if his eyes were deceiving him, Allen said, "You know something, children? I *think* I'm seeing *tracks!* I'd *say* there's been some passing out here on this road today. You boys've both got good eyes -- a whole *lot* better than mine, anyway. Do *you* see some tracks?"

Standing unsteadily, Kenneth Ray balanced himself by holding the sideboard and leaning over. "*I* do, Daddy. I see wagon tracks! I *think*! Over here on this side. Yeah, I *do*! *I see some tracks over here!*"

"Well!" Allen said, deciding what *he'd* seen really *were* tracks. "Whoa, Beck!" He spent some time squinting at and studying the impressions in the snow. "Yes, Son, I'd say a wagon went either up or down this road! Yeah, a wagon. It could've gone right past us. . .yeah, while we were down in there at Lonzo's place. There are just *lots of tracks* out here! I'd say. . .tracks of horses and mules, too! Well, I'll be!"

Allen's comments prompted Beck to pass along *her* opinion. Sarcastically, she snorted: *Would you just listen to that man, Kate? I hope you're listening to this senseless talk that's coming out of his mouth. Just a bunch of hot air! You'd think that Allen'd be smart enough to know other mules and horses make it their business to go up and down this same old road! Huh!*

Kate chose to remain snortless.

"Yeah! Yeah!" Beck snorted, slogging along. *"That Allen! Now, what's so big about another wagon and other mules and horses being out here on this road? I know lots of mules that go up and down this road, Kate. Yeah, I do! I know, Kate! Allen thinks he knows it all. Allen's not the only man who drives a team out here on this ole road. Huuh! I'm not trying to get you all riled up, Kate. Well, I guess I oughta just close my trap.*

Stubbornly, Beck silenced herself.

And mixed with the jingling and jangling and clanging and creaking and clipping and clopping, the next sound was a short, subsued sonance -- *zi-s-s!* -- coming from Bennie's side of the wagon. The core of his last apple flew up into the air. The snowy ground caught it. And crumping sounds -- *crunch! crunch!* -- came from under the quilt. Not much was left of that last apple either -- just a couple of brown seeds and a short, dried-up stem. It made its own *zi-s-s* when Kenneth Ray "gave it a pitch" over his side of the wagon.

Under the quilt the boys were -- again. All of Lonzo's apples were gone. There'd be no more crunching and crackling. The boys'd *be compelled* to listen to the

humdrum. There was nothing more for them to do *except* listen -- and think about gravy and biscuits and Mommie and Geraldine.

Soon, Ole Beck and Kate came to the T at the end of the wagon-*and*-mules-*and*-horses dirt road. And they didn't dillydally around and wait for Allen to call out, "*Gee! Gee!*" No! They were on familiar ground, and they were calling the shots. Well, actually, Beck was the mule in charge, and *she* was calling *most* of the shots! And that wagon swayed and creaked and turned to the *right* -- in the direction of The Fox Dan Webb Place!

Calmed down after all of the *rig-a-muh-row* -- a Johnson County term for a bunch of useless nonsense -- Beck concluded she'd held her snorts long enough. Holding her piece for the sake of peace was beyond her. Her keeping quiet was *over!* So, Beck went back to being a mouthy, I've-got-a-mind-of-my-own mule. She put it this way: *Yeah, Kate, I guess you'll listen to me now, won't you? I've tried to tell you! That Allen's one hardheaded man! Once he makes up his mind to do something, he'll do it or he'll die trying. A few times back there on that Godforsaken hill, I was starting to think I just might not be able to make it up to the top! You can't just loaf around and make it up a hill like that one! No! No! But, Kate, I'm pretty stubborn -- like Allen, I guess -- and I didn't want to have to spend the rest of my life hung up in some lousy hole. I did all right, didn't I, Kate?*

Belligerent Beck bucked for an answer: *Kate? I did all right, didn't I, Kate?*

Kind Kate kept silent.

Now, Beck'd never been known as a mule who'd learned when to shut up and leave well enough alone. She kept prodding: *I did all right, didn't I, Kate? Didn't I? Uh. . . uh. . .I. . . We did all right, didn't we, Kate. Kate? Don't you think <u>we</u> --? For goodness' sake, <u>say</u> something, Kate!*

Putting together a polite response to Beck's annoying, narcissistic notions about her overblown importance, the restrained Kate dismissed her usual, quiet nature and became *dis*quieted. It was a *first* for Kate! ***However!*** Coinciding with Kate's soft-spoken, once-upon-a-time-on-a-snowy-road declaration, Kenneth Ray and Bennie began making an awful ruckus! They were laughing and throwing Lonzo's quilt up into the air and over their heads and all around -- just having a *big time!* And wouldn't you know it? Just when Kate was ready to cut loose and let Ole Beck *have it*, her soft snorts were drowned out by their loud, nonstop interruptions!

And they *did* have a justifiable reason for their louder-than-Kate outburst. Many times they'd ridden in this same wagon and felt it sway and make this same turn to the right at the T. *Oh, yes, sir-ee!* Kenneth Ray and Bennie knew they were on the Goreville-Tunnel Hill road *and* not too far from The Fox Dan Webb Place!

Full of anticipation -- and after throwing that quilt around to their satisfaction -- they were on their feet and standing behind Daddy, talking and laughing. All happening at the same time, the boys were carrying on and Kate was carrying on and Beck was trying to *hear Kate*. Kate snorted softly, for sure! Even at Kate's loudest, Beck couldn't hear her. And the boys, trying to keep from yelling in Daddy's ears, covered their mouths -- every now and then. Well, their subdued vocals went on for a time, and all of Kate's soft snorting went on for a time, and after all of Kate's snorting was snorted

and done, Beck'd managed to hear only a few words: *. . .and that's about all I have to say, Beck!*

To say the least, Beck was disappointed.

Allen, taking the matter back into his hands, threw cold water on the boys' enthusiasm when he said, "Now, children, you oughta get back under that quilt. We've still got a good ways to go. We've got to go up this road a little piece and then go on past The Webb Church up here on the big curve. . . ."

. . .and back under the quilt they were again -- for the umpteenth time! Tired from all of the excitement, they fell asleep. Ole Beck and Kate clipity clopped toward the east and rounded the big curve and aimed for The Fox Dan Webb Place.

Meanwhile, there Allen was -- riding along on the wagon seat -- feeling joy. It should've been *too cold* for him to whistle. He should've been *too tired* and *too hungry* to whistle. But he was close to home, and *he felt a whistle coming on!* From his lips came the melody of his own special song: "Love lifted me. . .! Love lifted me. . .!"

Only Beck and Kate listened to the musical notes coming from Allen's puckered up lips. They clipity clopped. Allen whistled. And then he stopped whistling, but they kept on with their clipity clopping. And Allen was thinking with each step they made: *Yeah. . .The Webb Church. A lot of good folks in that church. . .a lot of Webbs. . . and a lot of good folks've already gone on. . . .and that's the way it is! The Bible says so! And that goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. . . .*

On past The Webb Church the team went. Allen's thoughts continued: *That's in the Bible. Adam and Eve! And then there was Abraham. All of that's in the first book in the Bible. Abraham. . . They say he's the father of the Jews. . . . Yeah. . .that's a lot to think about! Well, I think I see the road to the cemetery. Yeah. . . !*

"Say, children!" he called out. "Boys, right up here's The Webb Cemetery Road!"

Those words brought Bennie to his feet. He'd been *sound asleep* when they passed The Webb Church. And here they were at The Webb Cemetery Road! Bennie figured that road that Daddy'd just named off was *really* close to home.

Clutching the bird box, he jumped up and yelled, "Daddy! We're almost there! Hey! Kenneth Ray! We're almost *home!* Wake up, Kenneth Ray!"

Bennie's face pressed hard against Allen's back. Gently, a long arm reached out to draw Bennie's small body close -- to comfort him. Bennie -- with his bird box -- stood on the floor of the wagon bed and leaned against Daddy.

Sensing that Bennie was on the verge of crying, he empathized. "Say, now, don't you know we'll be home before too long, Son?" Allen, too, was feeling much like Bennie. "Yes, now," he said, swallowing the lump in *his* throat, "it won't be long *now*! And I thank the good Lord! *Phew!*"

Also awake and standing, Kenneth Ray moved close to Bennie -- saying nothing. Kenneth Ray wanted to cry, too, but he just stood there next to Bennie -- and right behind Daddy.

And they were clipping it off at a "tobble" fair clip. They were on the high ridge of the road, a "mite of a piece" east of The Webb Cemetery Road, and, yes, they were within seeing distance of The Fox Dan Webb Place. Then, all of a sudden -- right out of the clear blue sky -- Allen gave Ole Beck and Kate a stern command: *"Whoa! Whoa!"*

True to history, Allen had a reason for *everything* he did. He mandated that Johnny-on-the-spot whoa because he was afraid he just might be *imagining* things! Allen'd called for that fast stop so he could get his bearings and clear his head.

And having two good ears, Beck'd clearly heard Allen -- but she didn't give *two hoots and a holler* about following any whoaing orders. So, she thumbed her nose at him. Yes, Beck just kept "stepping it off" -- and *she didn't miss a beat!*

Kate, too, had heard him say, "Whoa!" Now, very seldom did she ignore Allen. BUT, if you haven't ever *been* a mule working alongside Beck, you don't understand what Kate was up against. You know, don't you, that Beck was the mule in charge?

Most generally, Allen was the man in charge. But for the first time in *his* life, he relented and let Beck be boss. That lasted for a short spell and during that short spell, his mind was *all boggled.* Perhaps he was hungry. Perhaps he was tired. Yes, he was both hungry and tired! For whichever reason, nothing was on the plumb line for him. He was seeing out-of-the-ordinary sights in front of his eyes, but Beck wasn't, and BECK WAS BOSS. That right there spelled *trouble*!

Beck's short temper got the best of her, and she really "showed out" and threw a good one! Perhaps *she* was hungry. Perhaps *she* was tired. Yes! Yes! But Beck's primary reason for flying off the handle was ***Allen,*** and she didn't mince any snorts: *Good grief! That confounded Allen! That man's not thinking right -- telling us to whoa when we're this close to the house. H-u-u-h! I was going along here thinking about some good Johnson County fescue hay and some of that good water from that pond and a good night's rest in a barn. What about you, Kate?*

Kate was silent, satisfied with shouldering her part of the load.

Suddenly, it dawned on Beck! She realized complaining about Allen and trying to converse with Kate was about as useless as pouring sand down a rat hole. Beck'd had all she could take! She was one "fed up" mule! She decided -- right then and there -- that she'd not *take it* any longer! Furthermore, she determined she'd do her own whoaing *when* and *where* and *how* she pleased! And, of course, one thing led to another.

The wagon, all loosened up and rolling along at a faster-than-normal pace, was completely under Beck's control. With her head up in the air, Beck *stubbornly* pulled that wagon of boards, bolts, and cargo. She snorted with every single step. And then, without any warning, ***Beck froze in her tracks!*** Wagon wheels stopped in *their* tracks, too! And that worn-out wagon lunged and jerked and banged -- violently. Why, Ole Beck's temper tantrum couldn't even hold a candle to the protest noises that *wagon* made: *Scr-e-e-ch! Rattle! Clang! Clang! SCR-E-E-CH. . . !*

Now, Beck's bad judgment and lack of good, common mule sense also affected poor ole Kate! Up until the time when Beck threw her fit, Kate'd been clipity clopping along in step with her. And, mercy! All of a sudden -- in the blink of an eye -- there she was in *front of Beck* and standing "*yankee godlin*" with her harness jerked out of kilter, and that put a powerful strain on Kate's neck, and, no, things weren't going too well! So! Kate -- because of Beck's imbecility -- *had* to freeze, or she would've risked falling down and breaking a leg or something worse, her neck!

Yes, it's correct to say one thing led to another!

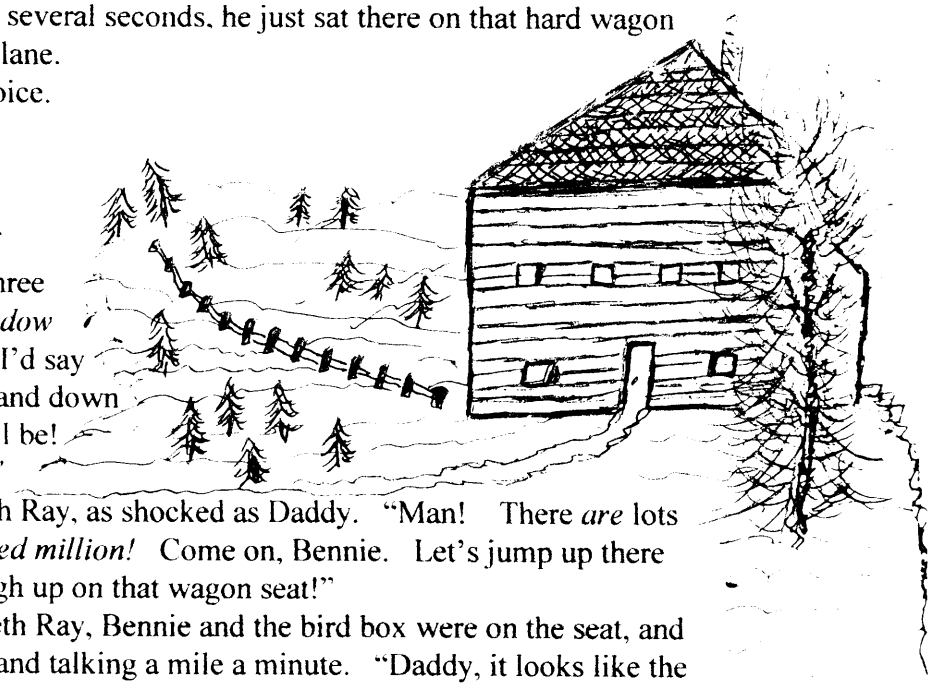
Bennie, even with Allen's arm around him, was pitched forward with the box and bird. And then, in a rocking motion, he fell backward and knocked Kenneth Ray down --

flop! -- and *landed on him!*

Quite a scramble took place on that wagon bed! There was no question about *that!* Luckily, Kenneth Ray and Bennie weren't hurt. Neither of them was bleeding, and after Bennie saw the bird was still in the box, he figured the bird'd be fine, too. There *was* one question neither Kenneth Ray nor Bennie could answer: *WHAT'S. . . WHAT'S. . . WHAT'S GOING ON?*

In the windup of it all, Ole Beck and Kate were standing still. Beck was fit to be tied. Kate was confused. Bennie -- with his bird in the box -- resumed his place with Daddy's arm around him. Kenneth Ray was on his feet and rubbing his head -- where it'd been smashed. And Allen -- the main ramrod -- was sitting on the wagon seat with *his* mind going around and *around!*

In *all* of his thirty-two years, Allen Adolph Schierbaum had never seen the likes of it! He thought he was *seeing things!* Right there in front of his eyes, less than a fourth of a mile ahead of him -- up on the hill at The Fox Dan Webb Place -- was the *strangest sight* he'd *ever* seen. For several seconds, he just sat there on that hard wagon seat and stared at the house and the lane.



"Boys!" he said in a low voice. "Would you just look up there! Look at that house! I see *lights*! Do you boys see lights? There are lights in every window of the house. I guess Katie's got all three coal oil lamps lit. *Why, every window is lit up!* Well. . .! And I'd say. . .I'd say those are lanterns. . .lanterns all up and down that lane! Just look, children! I'll be! *Why, I never saw the likes of it all!"*

"**Whew -ee**!" yelled Kenneth Ray, as shocked as Daddy. "Man! There *are* lots of lights up there -- prob'ly a *hundred million!* Come on, Bennie. Let's jump up there with Daddy! We can see better high up on that wagon seat!"

With some help from Kenneth Ray, Bennie and the bird box were on the seat, and Kenneth Ray was finding his place and talking a mile a minute. "Daddy, it looks like the lights inThe Tunnel at nighttime when everybody's at home! We went to The Tunnel that time after dark, didn't we, Daddy?"

At that moment, Allen wasn't thinking about *any* lights in The Tunnel His mind was on all of the lights up at the house. . . .

. . .and Bennie, seeing the lights in the windows and out in the yard and up the lane, was reminded of the time when he'd seen lots of lights up in the *sky* -- the time when *somebody* carried him and took him and Kenneth Ray frog gigging after supper. And he remembered it was *dark!* And the moon was out. And the *sky* was full of big stars. And *somebody* set a big bucket down on the bank of the pond. And the frogs said, "*Eeek!*" when *whoever-it-was* poked them. And the frogs jumped around a lot, even after they'd been poked and thrown into the bucket of pond water. And *somebody* told Mommie she'd need to have a *red hot* skillet. And he remembered Mommie'd said she hoped she wouldn't have to fry up another frog leg as long as she lived!

But, in *this* particular moment, Bennie was seeing the world from way up high on the wagon seat -- through the eyes of a four-year-old. He was mystified! He'd never seen that many lights *down close to the ground!*

"Bennie!" Kenneth Ray explained. "This looks just like *The Tunnel!*"

That didn't mean too much to Bennie. He hadn't ever been to The Tunnel -- not at night. Mommie didn't let him go to The Tunnel in the dark -- without her. Tears filled his eyes again -- when he thought about Mommie.

Closer and closer they moved toward the lane to The Fox Dan Webb Place. Allen directed Ole Beck and Kate with gees and haws, going past riderless horses and mules hitched to peopleless wagons, all at a standstill along the road's scant, sharply slanted shoulders.

Shortly, he came to a congested mess of teams and wagons -- in the middle of the road -- with only a path between them. That didn't set too well with Beck and she was bellyaching again: *Why in this world don't these folks in Johnson County have enough sense to pull off the road and let a feller pass? I swear! They don't know how to drive a team! I've seen 'em do this down at The Webb Cemetery on Decoration Day. And even when somebody's trying to bury somebody, they do this. Kate, you'd think they'd learn better! No! No! Not on your life! They just gob up in a bunch and stop smack dab in the middle of the road! No wonder they call 'em hillbillies. What do YOU think, Kate?*

Just in the "nick-of-time," Kate received a reprieve from passing her opinion. And that's because at the time -- at the minute -- *at the very second* when Kate opened her mouth to snort, Allen called out, "Whoa! Whoa, Beck! Whoa, Kate!"

Relieved, Kate gave a sigh and blew air out of her nostrils.

But Beck, still on a toot, had to have the last snort: *Well, it's about time! Allen's finally got some sense. What he needs is a good lick on his head -- like the one we got down there when we got clobbered with that aggravatin' tree limb. You know something, Kate? That Allen could stand some lessons in mule driving. Huh! But it'd take all of the mules in Johnson County to teach him anything. Why, way back there I could've told Allen we'd gone about as far as we could go!*

Poor ole Kate! Without snorting, Kate thought: *I'll be one happy mule when I can get myself unhitched from this wagon and this Beck. I'm going to get myself over into a corner of that barn stall and not come out till I have to! Never'll be too soon!*

Allen picked up the lantern, lit it, and was off the wagon. "We can walk the rest of the way," he said, reaching for Bennie. "Come on, Son, and I'll get you down. Yeah.. . .just hang on to your box. Now, you come on, Kenneth Ray."

The lane -- not *too much* of a hill -- to The Fox Dan Webb Place was a few feet ahead. Not waiting for Daddy and the lantern, Kenneth Ray and Bennie ran ahead, as fast as their feet could carry them. They made the left turn. Trudging up that track-filled, snow-covered lane they found to be a struggle, but they were on their way to see Mommie and Geraldine. Yes, they were covering quite a bit of ground, but then. . .

*Ker **plop**!* Bennie tripped over his own feet, dropped the bird box, and landed face down in the snow. Gently, Bennie was placed upright, the box was dusted off and placed under Bennie's arm, and there Allen was -- holding Bennie's one

free hand and Kenneth Ray's hand -- dragging them through the snow up their *last* hill. Oh, yes! They and that bird were going *home* as fast as they could!

From where Allen and the boys were, he could see lights in the windows and the lit lanterns. Although he was unable to recognize any one person, he could hear people talking *very loudly.* A few dogs yelped, too.

The smell of wood smoke drifted through the air. As they neared the edge of the front yard, he saw flames -- off to the left of the house -- and heard popping and cracking. Sparks danced wildly. *I guess somebody's built that fire out there -- on purpose,* he thought. *I don't think the house is burning down. Hmmm. . . !*

Circling the fire, humanlike forms bounced up and down and moved rapidly. Blurred images changed from red to black and from black to red.

"Well!" Allen said.

As he drew closer, he saw the slow-moving, shadowy figures mingling together in constant motion. Flames went high. Embers shot upward. Allen figured somebody might be throwing chucks of wood into the fire.

In the foreground of the reddish glow, he could see heads bobbing up and down and hear folks talking -- all at the same time -- and asking questions and calling out names. The front yard of The Fox Dan Webb Place was *alive* with voices full of excitement.

"Over here, John! Over *here*!"

"Katie says we oughta go to *Lonzo's* place!"

"Come on! Let's go! I'll take that road over there!"

"We're ready to go looking!"

"I'll go off by The Webb Church!"

"Somebody! Hey! *Somebody* tell Katie we're leaving!"

"Where's John?"

"Go get Katie! Tell her we're ready to go looking!"

The women -- busy inside the house with the cooking and the children -- were keenly aware of the verbal commotions of their fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, and neighbors. As if in response to the noise and the clamoring, the front door to The Fox Dan Webb House swung open. Light from the coal oil lamps instantly spilled out through the rectangle of blackness.

As if on feet of air, Kenneth Ray and Bennie effortlessly outran Allen. They had no fear of the people's voices -- no fear of the ones who watched as they ran -- no fear of the many faces around them -- no fear of falling down -- no fear of bumping into someone -- no fear of dropping the bird box -- no fear of being crushed in the crowd -- and no fear of being held back! Their feet were on familiar ground -- the front yard of The Fox Dan Webb Place -- and they knew how to find the front door to *their house!*

Allen, at the edge of the yard, was able to see over the heads of the people. Although still several feet away from the house, he could make out the form of a figure -- one he *believed* to be that of a woman -- and he watched it move through the doorway and onto the front porch. He blinked hard, trying to adjust his focus. *"That looks a lot like Katie!"* he whispered. *"That's just about her size. I believe that* ***IS*** *Katie -- and I'd say she's carrying Geraldine!"* He squinted. He then trusted his eyes. He had no

doubts! ***HE WAS SURE! HE WAS SURE THE WOMAN WAS KATIE! AND HE KNEW KATIE <u>WAS</u> CARRYING GERALDINE!***

When Katie stepped out on the front porch, the noise and talking died down.

"Now, folks," she began. Her voice quivered. "Now, folks, I don't want to see anybody go off this place hungry or without something to eat. I. . .I. . ."

She turned to one side.

Allen *figured* Katie might've been saying something, but *what* he didn't know. He didn't hear her say, "Lula?"

Allen then saw a second figure come forward into the lighted opening. Spellbound, he followed its movements toward Katie and Geraldine.

"Well!" Allen whispered. "I'd say. . .yeah, I'd say that right there *might be* ***Mommie***!"

And behind that motherlike figure was a third, taller figure. Against the faint light filtering through the doorway, he could make out the shadowy silhouettes of three people standing on the front porch.

In a hoarse voice barely above a whisper, Lula commenced: "Katie's right, folks. There's plenty of food in this kitchen. There's some birthday cake, too." She paused. She swallowed. She *made* herself speak. "Allen's thirty-two years old -- today. I was just telling Albert -- *Albert here* -- that I'd never forget that day. . .that day when Allen was born. It was on a Friday. . . .on the twenty-second day of December. . . ."

Being within a few feet from the porch, Allen *did hear* a word now and then -- *Katie, food, Albert, December* -- and he was thinking, *That's got to be Mommie. But it doesn't sound like Mommie. But -- anyway -- I think that's Mommie!*

After tightening her head scarf, Lula began once more: ". . .and that was in nineteen hundred and three. And, folks, it was cold that day! I'll not ever forget that day! Yes. . .well. . .now. . .I'll not ever forget *this* day either. I'm so *worried.* We're *all* worried. . . .but. . ."

Slowly, the taller figure moved closer to Lula.

"Well!" Allen said, responding to the movement of *that* figure. "I'll *be*! *Now, I know that's -- that's -- that's* ***Poppie!*** *Yeah. . .right there by* ***Mommie!*** Why, this is *something*! *My lands!"*

He then saw three slender, shorter forms emerge through the doorway. Two stood side by side, close to the poppielike figure. The tallest one, he figured, *had* to be Mary Caroline, his 16-year-old sister. He then recognized another one -- his other sister, 13-year-old Minnie. The shortest figure found a place in front of the girls, and Allen was sure he was looking at his baby brother, 11-year-old Roscoe Wesley.

Of all things! My word! he said to himself. *There's* ***Murrie!*** And ***Minnie!*** *And, yeah! That's* ***Roscoe!*** *Well!*

Wordless, the attentive spectators looked on. Their eyes were fixed upon the porch. The scene demanded absolute silence. Even the fire's popping and cracking seemed intrusive. And a dog's barking was out of place.

Lula stepped forward. She tightened her head scarf. She coughed. She cleared her throat. And the folks were quiet. Every person in that front yard realized Lula was *trying* to tell them something.

Poor Lula. . . and Albert. . . and these children. Katie thought. *Lula's always so strong. I've not ever seen her in a shape like this. Lord, help her.*

Katie, with Geraldine on her hip, stepped forward to speak for Lula. "Folks." she began, "you know we *all* thank you, and -- "

Abruptly, *her* words were cut off by *these* words: "Mommie! Mommie! *Mom*mie -- !"

Unexpectedly, the crowd erupted! Like the flying embers from the fire, the people's voices lifted. Intensity in shouting and yelling increased. The just-a-moment-ago, of-one-mind crowd became flustrated.

Katie was unable to understand what was happening, but she *knew* -- even over the uproar -- that she'd heard the repetitive calls. They sounded familiar to her! And in her *mind*, she could see the faces of the callers.

What she couldn't *actually* see were Kenneth Ray and Bennie -- with the bird in the box -- and the zigzagging and pressing and dodging and weaving through the maze of Christmas Tree Country folks. But they, Katie *knew*, were out there -- out there somewhere in that gang of people!

Clearly, Katie heard: "Mommie! Mommie! ***Mom*** - mie!"

Amidst all of the confusion, Katie cried out. She spoke through the darkness and talked to the voices. "Kenneth Ray! Bennie! Children, where's Allen? Where's your *daddy*?" she screamed, losing her composure.

The repeated summons -- *"**MOM** - MIE! **MOM** - MIE!"* -- preceded the boys. Their calling out grew louder. They persisted. They refused to be outdone by the noisy confusion.

Very distinctly, Katie heard: ***"MOM - MIE! MOM - MIE!"***

Acting on its own volition, *the crowd split wide open!* One cluster of bodies moved to the left. The other cluster moved to the right. From noiseful restlessness to quiet calmness the crowd changed! Katie heard only murmuring -- and whispering -- and sounds of running -- and the tinkling of the metal in buckle-up overshoes. AND THEN! She saw two small childlike figures coming out of the darkness -- into the open space -- right there in front of her. And she realized they were running toward her!

Finally -- *finally!* -- ***she saw her boys with her own two eyes!***

She hurried down the steps to meet them. With one arm, she held Geraldine, tightly, and held one arm out for them. Their weight against her pushed her backwards. She sat down on the edge of the porch step -- crying -- holding her three children -- and, somewhere, there was a bird in a box.

"Kenneth Ray! Bennie! Now, tell me! ***Where is your daddy?***"

"I'm *right here*, Katie!" he said -- out of breath -- making his way to her.

She held up one hand to touch him. She'd heard *Allen's* voice! She *knew* the sound of his voice! Katie fainted -- "dead away" -- with one hand reaching out for him and with her arms around Geraldine and Kenneth Ray -- and Bennie with the bird in the box!

THE END